

A Theological Analysis of Life Extension via Aging Attenuation with Particular
Reference to Ascetic Practice in the Desert Fathers

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I hereby declare that this thesis was composed by myself, Todd Thomas Woodford Daly, and that the work is my own, and that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Todd Thomas Woodford Daly

In memory of Harriet Norgard

(May 21, 1915 – May 19, 2007)

Abstract

In this thesis I offer a theological analysis of biomedical efforts to extend the healthy human lifespan by attenuating the aging process, situating this project within the Christian quest to holiness. The potential of even modestly extended life spans has profound social, familial, political, economic, religious, and environmental implications, and warrants considerable theological reflection, hitherto largely absent from contemporary ethical discussion. Hence, I critique the biomedical attempt to extend human life via aging retardation by considering the historical attitudes towards one's aging body and longevity within the Christian tradition, paying particular attention to shifts in attitude regarding aging and decay, and by examining the Christian discipline of fasting as practiced by the Desert Fathers, who believed that an attenuated rate of aging was one physiological outcome (among others) subsumed under a larger moral project of character transformation. While the concept of a normative lifespan as derived from Scripture is highly tenuous, a relationship between finitude and a wisdom that recognizes one's bodily limits does emerge. While key figures in the history of the Church have acknowledged both the difficulties of earthly life and the promise of bodily resurrection leading to a general ambivalence concerning the length of life and its extension, such attitudes were challenged by Francis Bacon and mirrored during the theological upheavals of the Great Awakenings in America. Drawing upon the work of Charles Taylor and Thomas R. Cole, I discuss the theological shifts whereby spiritual growth was segregated from physical aging via an increasingly instrumental stance towards aging and its mutability, increasing one's fear of death. In the remainder of the thesis I examine St. Antony's ascetic regime which enabled him to 'remake' his body as part of reordering and refining his soul to be the leader of his body, a regime which entailed an attenuated rate of aging. Drawing upon Karl Barth's christological anthropology who locates the unity and order of soul and body in the person of Jesus Christ, I demonstrate how current attempts to retard aging exacerbate the 'disorder' and segregation of body and soul, described as 'sloth' and 'care,' negating the role of the body and its limitedness in the formation of one's soul, and failing to mitigate the fear of death occasioned by such a disorder. Finally, I situate the Christian discipline of fasting as an alternative to life extension within the context of the practices of faith communities, understood minimally as baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Abbreviations

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| <i>ACW</i> | Ancient Christian Writers |
| <i>ANCL</i> | Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 |
| <i>ANF</i> | The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 |
| <i>AP</i> | Apophthegmata Patrum |
| <i>FC</i> | Fathers of the Church |
| <i>LW</i> | Luther's Works |
| <i>NIDOTTE</i> | New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis |
| <i>NIV</i> | New International Version |
| <i>NPNF</i> | A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church |
| <i>RSV</i> | Revised Standard Version |
| <i>SCG</i> | Summa Contra Gentiles |
| <i>ST</i> | Summa Theologica |

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Introduction

We are living longer. Over the last century the average life expectancy for both males and females has increased thirty years.¹ Children born in the most developed nations during this decade can expect to reach 75 or 80 years and beyond even as increasing numbers are living into their eighties and even nineties, in many cases doubling the lifespan of their forebears living at the turn of the twentieth century. These tremendous gains in life expectancy can be attributed primarily to the effective treatment of acute illnesses and diseases like tuberculosis and smallpox, the reduction of the infant mortality rate, and improvements in sanitary conditions. Despite these increases in longevity however, there has been no substantial change in the maximum human lifespan of approximately 120 years, highlighting the fact that we have not altered the rate of the human aging process itself. Thus, while the last century has witnessed unprecedented increases in life expectancy, there is general agreement between the medical and scientific communities that we are approaching our biological limits to longevity, with the recognition that these conventional approaches to medicine which attempt to mitigate individual diseases will continue to yield only marginal gains in the overall human longevity within these biological limits.²

As life expectancy continues to rise, so too has the incidence of chronic illness and disease associated with aging. The near abolition of acute infectious diseases like tuberculosis, rheumatic fever, and smallpox, has precipitated the rise of chronic diseases associated with and related to aging such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, arteriosclerosis, arthritis, adult onset diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cancer, and cirrhosis of the liver.³ Hence, marginal gains in life expectancy in many

¹ See <http://www.demog.berkeley.edu/~andrew/1918/figure2.html> and <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/us.html> as quoted in Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 57. In the United States the life expectancy for babies born in 2000 was 79.6 and 73.5 years for females and males respectively.

² S. Jay Olshansky, "Duration of Life: Is There a Biological Warranty Period?" The President's Council on Bioethics, Dec. 12, 2002. <http://www.bioethics.gov/transcripts/dec02/session2.html>. See also President's Council, *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness* (Washington, D.C., 2003), 166.

³ James F. Fries, "Aging, Natural Death, and the Compression of Morbidity," *The New England Journal of Medicine* 303 (1980): 132.

cases result in a prolonged state of decline. Though life is becoming *longer*, it is not necessarily *healthier*. It has been reported that America is on the verge of a “mass geriatric society,”⁴ as those eighty-five and older currently represent the fastest growing segment of the population. The President’s Council on Bioethics has recently noted that

*the defining characteristic of our time seems to be that we are both younger longer and older longer; we are more vigorous at ages that once seemed very old and we are far more likely to suffer protracted periods of age-related disability and dependence because we live to ages that few people reached in the past.*⁵

Hence, in America “a growing percentage of the elderly are living through longer periods of dependence and disability,”⁶ meaning that many are now far more likely to die after a period of protracted illness and progressive diminishment in physiological and cognitive abilities. People in the United States on average suffer two years of severe disability prior to death, a figure that is likely to increase.⁷ Thus, the very medical advances that have extended the period of youth are likely to extend the period of decline, the very scenario most would rather avoid.

Certainly, the idea of a prolonged period of decline with diminished capacities is most unpalatable in Western cultures that place a high value on autonomy and productivity, where the specter of death is increasingly concealed from public view in hospital wards and intensive care units, and obscured in daily life by the increased pace of living.⁸ When forced to recall one’s own impending demise, most would

⁴ President’s Council, *Taking Care: Ethical Caregiving in Our Aging Society* (Washington, D.C., 2005), xvii, 11.

⁵ President’s Council, *Taking Care*, 6-7; see also 22.

⁶ President’s Council, *Taking Care*, 11, 19-20.

⁷ President’s Council, *Taking Care*, 12. Moreover, Ronald Klatz has observed that ninety percent of healthcare expenditures are spent on care for those in the last two to three years of life, “Anti-Aging Medicine,” 61.

⁸ William F. May, “The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience,” in *Perspectives on Death*, ed. Liston O. Mills (New York: Abingdon Press, 1969): 168-196. See also Ray S. Anderson, *Theology, Death and Dying* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992); Philippe Ariès, *The Hour Of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (London: Penguin Books, 1981); Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992); Ernst Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973); Jacques Choron, *Death and Western Thought* (New York: Collier Books, 1963); Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990); Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York:

prefer to die suddenly, or in one's sleep—largely free from the debilities and frailty of old age and the diseases associated with it—than to witness the progressive decline and painful betrayal of a body no longer able to accommodate the desires that outpace it. Despite the tremendous increases in longevity over the last century, death remains an affront to intelligence and scientific capabilities, and a reminder of our limited ability to control nature. Indeed, the fear of death is a key motivating factor of the modern biomedical project that seeks to delay death as long as possible. While technology has enabled us to conceal the death of others and avoid our own death by putting it off for several years, our fear of decline and death has not abated. Given the advances in medicine, the probability of experiencing the scenario we most fear increases with each new technological breakthrough.

Until recently, there was little real hope of living healthier longer lives apart from conventional methods in medicine involving a continued battle against the diseases commonly associated with aging. Over the last two decades however, scientists and researchers have made substantial inroads in uncovering the biological processes of aging itself, suggesting that aging may not be as intractable as once thought. The search to live greatly extended lives has moved from the realms of myth, magic and quackery to legitimate medicine. Recent advances in the relatively young field of biogerontology—the study of the biology involved in the human aging process—have offered promising insights into the prolongation of healthy life, leaving some scientists optimistic that human aging may soon become the latest process to yield to technological manipulative effort. Techniques like selective breeding, dietary restriction, and genetic manipulation, have already demonstrated that the aging process is mutable, extending the life spans of mammals and multicellular organisms well beyond previously unattainable biological limits. Researchers have extended the lifespan of the nematode worm seven-fold by altering a single gene.⁹ The lifespans of laboratory mice have been increased by seventy percent by utilizing a combination of genetic alteration and caloric restriction.¹⁰ One of the most promising avenues of

Collier Books, 1969); Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (Harmondsworth, Eng. Penguin Books, 1963).

⁹ L. Partridge and D. Gems, "Mechanisms of Ageing: Public or Private?" *Nature Reviews Genetics* 3 (2002): 165-175. The lifespan was increased from thirty one days to just under two hundred days.

¹⁰ A. Bartke et al., "Extending the Lifespan of Long-lived Mice," *Nature* 414 (2001): 412.

aging research involves the link between dietary or caloric restriction and the specific genes activated by a reduced food intake. Most significant is the fact that these extensions have also lengthened the period of health and vitality. If such advances can be translated into human therapies, this might assuage the fear of prolonged physiological decline so vividly depicted in the myth of Tithonus or the Struldbruggs of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

In this climate of increased life expectancy and rising expectations of more years of health, the possibility of slowing down the aging process itself has become extremely attractive. That people might have an additional thirty to fifty years of health to pursue numerous athletic, artistic, and intellectual projects, or to live long enough to see one's great great grandchildren is an alluring thought. Members of the scientific community, all too familiar with the intransigent nature of aging, are not immune to this temptation. For a growing number of researchers and scientists, the ultimate enemy is not death but the aging process itself, insofar as battling aging represents the best means of ensuring a longer and healthier life.¹¹ Though historically aging has not been considered a disease, it is increasingly considered as a 'treatable' disorder, amenable to clinical therapy. While not everyone within the gerontological establishment is intent on understanding the human aging process for the explicit purpose of manipulating it, the project of life extension via aging retardation is now garnering more mainstream medical support.¹²

Among those who desire to manipulate the aging process, there is however no widespread agreement as to the goal of aging retardation apart from the near universal agreement that a prolonged period of physiological decline is the least desirable scenario. Some argue that aging should be retarded in hopes of mitigating the diseases associated with old age in order to reduce or compress the period of

¹¹ This statement was made by S. Jay Olshansky during a presentation to The President's Council on Bioethics, "Session 2: Duration of Life: Is There a Biological Warranty Period?" 12 December, 2002, <http://www.bioethics.gov/transcripts/march03/session2.html>. Olshansky asserts that "... aging should be the enemy, not death. Going after the aging process itself, I think is fundamental."

¹² Several have noted the current battles for legitimacy and 'orthodoxy' within the field of gerontology. See Eric T. Juengst, et al., "Biogerontology, 'Anti-aging Medicine,' and the Challenges of Human Enhancement," *Hastings Center Report* 33 (2003): 21-30.

decline or ill health before death, arguing that aging retardation ought to add life to years, rather than years to life. Those adopting this approach argue that the proper goal of retarding aging “is for all of us to lead long lives free of chronic disease and disability, and then die rather quickly as we reach the limits of the human life span, ‘worn out’ from the fundamental processes of aging.”¹³ Hence this model of prolongevity has been described as the *compressed morbidity* approach,¹⁴ given that the primary goal is perceived as improving one’s later years in life, allowing for an increase in life expectancy apart from concerns over increasing the maximum fixed lifespan. This is motivated in part by increasing medical costs in caring for the elderly, where the most common age associated diseases like cancer, heart disease, and stroke, currently account for fifty percent of the United States healthcare budget, (and where a very high proportion of expenditure is devoted to the last two years of life).¹⁵ Proponents of a compressed morbidity however, do not rule out the possibility that aging retardation may actually extend life beyond current biological limits.

Others are primarily interested in greatly surpassing current biological lifespan limits in hopes of delaying the onset of age associated pathologies as long as possible as well as compressing the period of morbidity, while denying the possibility of earthly immortality.¹⁶ Currently however, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that slowing the aging process itself would do anything more than push back the period of physiological decline. Thus, while there are conflicts regarding the overall goal of longevity medicine, it is difficult to maintain the distinction between slowing aging

¹³ Juengst et al., “Biogerontology, ‘Anti-aging Medicine,’” 25. See also The President’s Council on Bioethics, “Adding Years to Life: Current Knowledge and Future Prospects,” where Steven Austad admits the desire to die ‘in the pink of health’ as the ideal, though there is no way to know whether this indeed will be the case.

¹⁴ Stephen G. Post and Robert H. Binstock, “Introduction,” in *The Fountain of Youth: Cultural, Scientific, and Ethical Perspectives on a Biomedical Goal*, ed. Stephen G. Post and Robert H. Binstock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2. This term can be traced back to James F. Fries, “Aging, Natural Death,” 130-135.

¹⁵ Ronald Klatz, “Anti-Aging Medicine,” 61.

¹⁶ There is a movement known as transhumanism or posthumanism that aspires towards earthly immortality, or life as long as one wants it. See *The Scientific Conquest of Death: Essays on Infinite Lifespans*, ed. Bruce J. Klein (Buenos Aires: Libros en Red, 2004).

for the compression of morbidity and slowing aging for an extended life. Indeed, Juengst et al. have astutely observed that

if suffering is inimical to human flourishing, as so much of the biomedicine tacitly assumes, then delaying age-associated illnesses as long as possible before death is the obvious goal, whether within or beyond the historical life span.¹⁷

Regardless of these internal conflicts, the idea of a significantly prolonged healthy life has captured the public's imagination, as demonstrated by an increased willingness to pay homage to the cult of youth by investing in cosmetic surgery in the attempt to at least *appear* younger.

While the availability of any life extending technique is likely several decades away, numerous start-up biotech companies have now focused their collective empirical gaze on creating pharmaceuticals that mimic the life extending effects afforded by dietary restriction and genetic manipulation. Thus, while those in the scientific and research communities are concerned about the potential implications of greatly extended lives, the concerns are typically those of safety, regulation, and democratization, betraying an air of inevitability regarding the future implementation of aging retardation regimes. That a majority of the ethical discussions in relation to this project concern the potential consequences of longevity via aging retardation also bears witness to this fact. And yet it is difficult to deny that the effects of even modestly extended life spans raise fundamental moral issues about the nature and ends of the human condition. Immediate questions arise concerning the aging population, the effects life extension might have on intragenerational relationships, and the welfare of the biosphere. Many other questions have been raised in the literature on life extension including the following: the potential for increased intragenerational conflict; altered expectations concerning the age of retirement and the cost of extended pension benefits; the nature of human identity and the brain's capability to store memories over an increased period of time; when individuals might commence or end aging retardation regimes; potential links to assisted suicide and euthanasia; and the economic threat of an increasingly aging society.

¹⁷ Juengst et al., "Biogerontology, 'Anti-aging Medicine,'" 26.

The technological and ethical discussions of aging retardation put forward by the medical and scientific communities are currently outpacing the moral reflection from philosophers, ethicists and especially theologians. Moreover, most of this moral reflection presupposes consequentialist or utilitarian commitments, focusing almost exclusively on the projected outcomes of life extension as the determinant of its rightness. Such debates are often marked by their interminable character, a key feature of contemporary moral debates.¹⁸ This is not to say that the consequences of life extension have no role in moral reflection. But a focus on consequences obscures more fundamental moral questions like whether aging itself a problem that ought to be mitigated by our technological expertise. Other questions to consider are what the quest for life extension reveals about the modern understanding of embodiment and death, and what the impact of such a pursuit might have on one's character or moral formation. These questions have yet to be considered from within a Christian perspective informed by the creation, reconciliation, and redemption of humankind, and the person upon whom our redemption rests. In this thesis I attempt to address this deficiency.

In this thesis I offer a theological analysis of the biomedical project of life extension via aging attenuation. While some of the interventions may turn out to be genetic, it is important to emphasize that this theological treatment is not motivated from a genetic essentialist conception of humanity which affords DNA a privileged role in determining what is constitutive of human nature or personal identity. Later on however I will address one of the more promising techniques of manipulating aging in the form of pharmacological interventions which mimic the aging retardation achieved by fasting, as it places the goals of fasting from within the Christian tradition as practiced by the Desert Fathers in sharp relief to the modern scientific project, exposing some of its dangers. Before outlining the basic approach of this thesis, it will be helpful to briefly touch upon one approach that I will not follow.

¹⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1985), 6. While MacIntyre argues that these debates involve systematic disagreement and conflict over ends—a key feature of liberal societies lacking agreement on ends in the absence of a common overarching narrative in which to situate the good(s) necessary to flourish—the life extension debate between consequentialists illustrates too that the interminable character of such debates need not stem solely from the conceptual incommensurability of moral presuppositions.

The enigmatic character of aging itself poses problems for one common approach to bioethical dilemmas that depends on the distinction between therapy and enhancement, a distinction frequently undertaken in religious approaches to bioethical dilemmas. One weakness of this distinction is its reliance upon some conception of ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ in order to distinguish therapy from enhancement. While the vast majority of scientists and medical practitioners would not classify aging as a disease, few would deny that aging and disease are linked, though the relationship is a highly complex one. Thus, if aging is considered ‘natural’ or ‘normal,’ then retarding aging process to compress the period of morbidity and delay the impact of age associated diseases might be characterized as enhancement for therapeutic purposes, even while allowing for a significant extension in the maximum lifespan.¹⁹ Yet, as science continues to uncover the biological mechanisms of aging at the genetic level, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish these mechanisms from the etiologies of disease, and hence to distinguish between biological and pathological aging.²⁰

This is not to say however that the distinction is entirely invalid or beyond use, even though I remain skeptical about its usefulness with regards to the aging/disease distinction. Though Robert Song’s suggestion that enhancement might be better construed as an attempt to transcend (rather than recognize) the conditions of human limitedness is helpful,²¹ he seems to realize that some underlying structure or narrative is required in order to make the therapy/enhancement distinction more intelligible. Song essentially does this when he makes reference to the resurrection

¹⁹ As Gerald P. McKenny notes, this scenario may also be described as a distinction between therapeutic and non-therapeutic techniques. See “Religion and Gene Therapy: The End of One Debate, the Beginning of Another,” in *Companion to Genethics*, ed. Justine Burley and John Harris (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), 291. While McKenny sees little value in this distinction, Robert Song presents one of the strongest cases for maintaining this distinction, though not without modification. See *Human Genetics: Fabricating the Future* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002), 74-78.

²⁰ Herman T. Blumenthal, “The Aging-Disease Dichotomy: True or False?” *Journal of Gerontology: Medical Sciences* 58A (2003): 138-145.

²¹ Robert Song, *Human Genetics: Fabricating the Future* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2002), 76-77.

body as having considerable determinative force in discerning therapy from enhancement.²²

Moreover, while it might be argued that my thesis turns on such a distinction—as indeed I will offer criteria in Chapter 1 which are commonly employed to distinguish aging from disease—I am not entirely convinced that my critique of the current attempts to slow the aging process has suffered by failing to reference the distinction between therapy and enhancement. To note that there is still a widely-acknowledged difference between treating aging as a disease and treating diseases associated with aging need not imply that the therapy/enhancement distinction must be used in a theological critique of anti-aging science. That aging might one day be labeled a disease by the scientific community will have little impact on the therapy/enhancement distinction if such a distinction is grounded in a narrative which takes as its bearings the person of Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture.²³ While Song is rightly concerned that we maintain a distinction between *identifying* with one's body and *separating* oneself from one's body, I think that there are other ways to do this without having to appeal to therapy and enhancement. Thus, while I am not entirely opposed to using therapy and enhancement to discern where lines might be drawn (even if somewhat tenuously), I believe it to be too blunt an instrument in this case to do the necessary work here.

An equally unhelpful approach involves an appeal to a normal lifespan. Though such a thing can be statistically measured, and though there is general agreement that the upper limits of longevity are around one hundred and twenty years of age,²⁴ it is

²² Song, *Human Genetics*, 76.

²³ This by no means simplifies things. Any appeal to the Christian narrative as inscribed by scripture is fraught with difficulties. John Feinberg, for instance, effectively attempts to draw a line between therapy and enhancement by suggesting that genetic technology can be rightly used to overcome the effect of the fall. Yet, since he believes physiological death followed the fall, anti-aging technology suddenly has theological warrant. See John S. Feinberg, "A Theological Basis for Genetic Intervention," in *Genetic Ethics: Do the Ends Justify the Genes?* ed. John F. Kilner, Rebecca D. Pentz, and Frank E. Young, (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), 183-192.

²⁴ At least one Old Testament Scholar has suggested that the 120 year span mentioned in Genesis 6:3 is a limitation imposed by God in response to humanity deliberately intermarrying with the Nephilim to extend the human life span. See Oswald Loretz, *Schöpfung und Mythos: Mensch und Welt nach den Anfangskapiteln der Genesis* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1968), 43-44.

difficult to establish why a particular norm should be taken as a given. Moreover, the concept of a normal life span seems foreign to both the writers of scripture and the Church Fathers.²⁵ It would be wrong however to conclude that the writers of scripture were indifferent to long life. Long life is often mentioned as the result of living in obedience to God's commands (Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16; 6:2; 22:7; 32:47, 1 Kings 3:11, 14, 1 Chronicles. 29:28, 2 Chronicles 1:11, Job 12:12, Psalm 91:16, Proverbs 3:16; 10:27; 28:16, Ecclesiastes 7:15). But there is also a link between the brevity of life and wisdom (Psalm 90). Generally speaking, if long life is a gift from God, then it is not necessarily wrong to want a long life, even if scripture enjoins no concept of a 'normal' life span.

Rather than pursue an analysis along these lines, I will consider how the scientific quest for longevity fits within "the Christian struggle to holiness"²⁶ and the practices of character formation involved in becoming Jesus' disciples informed by the narrative of the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ as recorded in scripture. Such a struggle for holiness will necessarily entail assumptions about the human body and its role in character formation. Posing the problem of life extension in this manner gives rise to questions that might otherwise be suppressed by ethical approaches concerned exclusively with utility, consequences, or the 'categorical imperative,' including some forms of Christian ethics whose advocates seek to apply particular passages of Scripture in a literalist fashion to specific problems in condoning or condemning particular practices. In this regard I join those who reject the separation of Christian ethics from theology,²⁷ a notion scarcely

²⁵ "Special Gift and Special Burden: Views of Old Age in the Early Church," in *Growing Old in Christ*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 19-37, at 21-22. Augustine could not reconcile the claims of the verse with his experience, having observed "wonderfully vigorous" octogenarians, and therefore abandoned a literal interpretation for a spiritual one, *Expositions on the Psalms*, Psalm 90:6-9, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 8, 442 f.

²⁶ H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr., "Genetic Enhancement and Theosis: Two Models of Therapy," *Christian Bioethics* 5 (1999): 197. See also Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 14-15; Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1989), 46-62.

²⁷ See Karl Barth, *CD* II/2, 509-551; Stanley Hauerwas, "On Doctrine and Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 21-40; "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological," in *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16-42; Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, "Why Christian Ethics Was Invented," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2004), 28-38.

conscionable to the Church Fathers. Moreover, situating life extension within the Christian struggle to holiness also enables key figures within the history of Christian thought to contribute to the discussion, voices which tend to be muted or completely ignored in some ‘decisionist’ forms of Christian ethics, but which may prove surprisingly relevant for their ability to “grasp facets of the gospel that modern sensibilities too often overlook.”²⁸ Hence, I will consider what it means to ‘remake’ the human body for longevity in light of the Christian discipline of fasting as practiced by St. Antony and promulgated by Athanasius, whose ascetic regime enabled him to attenuate the aging process and thus extend his life in relative health. However, an historical approach that attends to key voices in the history of Christian thought by no means precludes an historical investigation into the origins of the modern scientific search for longevity and changes in attitudes towards aging which have contributed to the current situation. Scientific and theological developments do not exist in isolation from each other. On the contrary, I will show that modern attitudes concerning aging and its mutability are related to changing attitudes with regards to death and immortality in the history of Christian thought, particularly since the Reformation. Thus, I will develop my thesis along the following lines.

Chapter 1 begins with an elaboration of the issues surrounding contemporary research on human aging and the developments and conflicts within the field of biogerontology, and as such will deal with definitions concerning longevity and lifespan, the difficulties of defining aging, and the underlying theories of aging. The work of caloric restriction and the genes implicated in retarding aging will be situated among other possible avenues of longevity research. Finally, I briefly discuss scientific attitudes towards aging and the aging body engendered by such research.

In the second chapter I consider how aging has come to be perceived as a problem to be solved by medicine, the ‘whence’ of the increasingly instrumental stance toward the aging body. This question is enormously important lest ethical discussions are

²⁸ Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 38. See also Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Ligouri, MO: Triumph Books, 1995).

uncritically conducted under the assumption that the reigning moral standards and assumptions concerning aging are the norm. Rushing to scripture or theological discourse apart from understanding where particular underlying notions of embodiment and aging come from may produce moral guidelines or judgments that are unacceptably reactive or too far removed from where people live. Moreover, there is the risk of unwittingly underwriting practices and underlying assumptions that ought to be challenged. Thus, I trace the beginnings of the modern quest to attenuate aging to Francis Bacon, whose program entailed a shift toward a more instrumental stance toward the aging body, a stance he inscribed in the Christian drama of creation, fall, and final resurrection. I draw upon the work of Charles Taylor who examines the relationship between Bacon's program and Calvinistic strands of the Reformation and beyond, and more extensively on the work of cultural historian Thomas R. Cole who, in his examination of the relationship between cultural and religious thought, notes a general shift toward viewing aging as a problem requiring a medical solution. While Cole's analysis suggests that the contemporary view of aging as a problem for medicine has resulted from the *loss* of theological worldview (a worldview which he has no desire to recapture or rehabilitate), Bacon's construal of aging as a problem for medicine demonstrates how easily medicine can be theologically *underwritten*. I conclude that Bacon's vision of attenuating human aging as a return to Eden does not give adequate space to the incarnation, and that Cole's desire to recapture the existential integrity of aging and death inherent in the theology of the New England Puritans requires something more than postmodern narratives can supply.

In Chapter 3 I survey the ethical treatments of life extension, with particular reference to the concerns highlighted in Chapter 2. That is, I consider various arguments regarding life extension with particular regard to the moral significance of the body, and with regard to underlying narratives in which the moral significance is grounded. In particular, I note that consequentialist arguments either for or against suffer from failing to account for the body, and more substantially from a consideration of character development as it relates to aging, taking instead one's wants and desires as 'givens.' Moreover, those ethical treatments which rightly recognize the moral force of embodiment by attempting to ground morality in either nature or the body are better accounted for within a Christian metanarrative. Finally,

I consider the theological responses to life extension thus far, which, while broadly situated within the Christian metanarrative inscribed by creation and redemption, are nevertheless are disappointing for failing to reflect with any depth on the nature of embodiment in light of the incarnation. My thesis addresses this oversight.

In Chapter 4 I begin a theological response to life extension by examining both the nature of death and the desire for long life, given that life extension as a project entails some understanding of death. I will do this by surveying Christian theologians who lived at pivotal moments in the development of Christian theology. Specifically, I investigate death and long life as understood by Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Kierkegaard. While their treatments are not identical, common themes which should inform any attempt to attenuate aging from a Christian perspective emerge, including a considerable grasp of sin and its impact on human existence, and the promise of a resurrection body. Certainly the weight of Augustine can be detected amongst these thinkers as the desire for a long life, while readily acknowledged, was considerably tempered by human sinfulness and a longing to be rid of the body of sin. Yet, not all of the Church Fathers took as pessimistic a view of embodiment and longevity as did Augustine. In fact, in the East, Athanasius believed that the practice of fasting enabled the Christian to ‘put on’ a little of the resurrection body to be enjoyed at the general resurrection. Thus, in the final two chapters I discuss the early Christian belief that the body’s aging could indeed be attenuated, even as such a possibility took seriously both the reality of sin and the future resurrection.

Before describing the final two chapters of my thesis however, it will be helpful to further explain why I have chosen Athanasius over Augustine. While some ethicists have presented the mature Augustine’s affirmation of the human body in matters relating Christian ethics to technology and contemporary moral problems, it is right to question whether theological accounts of embodiment are best served by attending primarily to Augustine’s understanding of embodiment, for it seems that the body is often ‘left behind’ in his appropriation of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought. In particular, it has been noted that in discussing spiritual development his focus is nearly exclusively on attaining contemplative silence in the ‘inner self’ where one can refine one’s soul, unencumbered by the clamoring desires of the body. Margaret Miles has noted “Augustine’s characteristic and continuing emphasis on the body

and bodily practices as significant only because of their effects on the soul.”²⁹

However it might be more accurate to say that Augustine gave just enough attention to the body so as to *minimize* its effect on the soul. Indeed, in light of the incarnation of Christ others have asked Augustine more pointedly: “What is the meaning and power of Christ’s Flesh? . . . Why should we want to turn to our inner selves if God is to be found in something external, in the flesh?”³⁰

It seems clear that Augustine did rely on Platonic metaphors in speaking of the soul’s refinement. For instance, he exhorts Christians to take the journey inward, for “it is in the inner self that Truth dwells.”³¹ Indeed, while the soul loves the body through ‘force of habit,’ in his *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, Augustine makes an apparent allusion to *Phaedo* in speaking of the mind’s growth through love as a flight heavenward:

And when the mind is carried up to God in this love, it will soar above all torture free and glorious, with wings beauteous and unhurt, on which chaste love rises to the embrace of God.³²

Elsewhere Augustine notes that he is able to apprehend ‘Unchangeable Light’ with the eye of his soul by withdrawing to the recesses of his heart.³³ Augustine retains the Platonic notion of intelligibility with the assumption that there is a deep kinship between the soul and the divine, while at the same time drawing a distinction

²⁹ Margaret R. Miles, *Augustine on the Body* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 54.

³⁰ Phillip Cary, *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), x.

³¹ *True Religion* 39.72, in *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle et al., Volume I/8, *On Christian Belief*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Matthew O’Connell (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2005), 78. Charles Taylor has noted that Augustine believed that the soul marked the realm where one could know oneself and know the God who both created us and lies within, the God who “is closer to me than I am myself,” yet who is infinitely above me. See especially ch. 7, “In Interiore Homine,” in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 127-142, at 136.

³² *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* XXII.41, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 4, 53; *City of God Against the Pagans* XI.26.

³³ *Confessions* VII.10.16; *On the Trinity* VIII.2.3.

between the soul and God,³⁴ enabling him to affirm that “the chief good of the body, then, is not bodily pleasure . . . but simply the soul.”³⁵

One might assume that he uncritically borrowed elements of Platonic philosophy in his understanding of the human body. This however would hardly be a fair assessment, for his appropriation of Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought is considerably nuanced. For instance, he criticizes ‘the philosophers’ for asserting that the soul is only truly blessed when ‘denuded of the body.’³⁶ While Augustine says that the body is opposed to the soul, he nevertheless insists that the body is *not* alien to the nature of man in the same sentence.³⁷ In his work *On Continence* he says, “The flesh, then, is not our enemy; when its vices are resisted, it itself is loved because it is cared for.”³⁸ Augustine frequently referred to Paul in Ephesians 5:29—“no one ever hated his body.”³⁹ Indeed, it has been noted that the reality of bodily resurrection played an increasing role in the development of his mature theological understanding of embodiment.⁴⁰

Augustine nevertheless regularly speaks of ‘leaving the body behind’ in his moral/ascetical treatises. He asserts that it is a ‘well known fact’ that the body is, “by God’s most righteous laws, for the sin of old, man’s heaviest bond,” when speaking in contexts of moral development.⁴¹ This is not because the soul needs to be free from the turpitudes of sensation in order to properly apprehend the world of Forms, but because the body has suffered the punishment of sin in the fall. Thus,

³⁴ Cary, *Augustine’s Invention*, 55, traces the development of this distinction from earlier, more Neoplatonic statements. This distinction is clear in *City of God* XI. 26 and *Morals of the Catholic Church* I.18; XX; XXI.

³⁵ *Morals of the Catholic Church* V.7, in *NPNF First Series*, vol. 4, 43. See also I.27; I.33.

³⁶ *City of God* XIII.17.

³⁷ *On Continence* 26

³⁸ Miles, *Augustine on the Body*, 65, translating Augustine, *On Continence* 19.

³⁹ *The Usefulness of Fasting* 4.

⁴⁰ Cary, *Augustine’s Invention*, 118-119. See for instance *City of God* XXII.24. See also John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge, Eng. Cambridge University Press, 1994), ch. 4.

⁴¹ *Morals of the Catholic Church* XXII.40, in *NPNF First Series*, vol. 4, 53; *The Usefulness of Fasting* 2. He regularly cites Wisdom of Solomon 9:15 when making such assertions.

It is not the body, but the corruptibility of the body, which is a burden to the soul. . . . The word corruptible is added to show that the soul is burdened, not by any body whatsoever, but by the body such as it has become in consequence of sin.⁴²

Augustine entertains no notion of the soul's descent into the body as either taught by Plotinus or Origen.⁴³ It is not embodiment *itself* then that is a sin, for sin originated in the will.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the body is one locus of the punishment of sin, and indeed is further implicated in the propagation of sin as well.⁴⁵ Any program in moral refinement thus requires that the body be subdued so that reflection on God in one's inner self is unencumbered by bodily desires. This is particularly evident in Augustine's understanding of fasting, where he routinely speaks of subduing the body so that one may attend to the work of refining one's soul, a theme which could easily have been ascribed to Athanasius' work on St. Antony.

Augustine was aware of St. Antony and the anchorite movement taking place in Egypt, and spoke of this movement as superior to the fasting of the Manichees.⁴⁶ Though some believed these monks to have "abandoned human things more than they ought," Augustine affirms that "they work with their hands in such occupations as may feed their bodies without distracting their minds from God."⁴⁷ This statement captures Augustine's view on fasting: to subdue the body enough to focus one's mind/soul on God. Augustine's understanding of the purposes of fasting involved distancing the body from the soul as one turned 'inward.' Fasting meant "the entire subjugation of the body."⁴⁸ Unlike the heretics, Christians "subdue the body, that the

⁴² *City of God* XIII.17, in *NPNF* First Series, vol. 2, 252; *Confessions* VII.17.23; *Marriage and Desire* I.31.35; *On the Trinity* VIII.2.3.

⁴³ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV.8; V.1.12; Origen, *De Principiis* I.7.1-5.

⁴⁴ Evil arose from a perversion of the will, *Confessions* VII.16.22.

⁴⁵ *City of God* XIII.14-15. The body is indicted in the spread of sin through both our seminal involvement in Adam (*reatus*) and through biological transmission (*vitium*).

⁴⁶ *On Christian Doctrine*, "Preface," in *NPNF* First Series, vol. 2, 519.

⁴⁷ *Morals of the Catholic Church* XXXI.66, 67, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 4, 59. Fasting however was not harm one's health, *On the Good of Widowhood* 26. Augustine was however uneasy over the possibility of creating a 'Christian elite' among believers in general. See Conrad Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 4-19.

⁴⁸ *On Man's Perfection in Righteousness* VIII.18, in *NPNF* First Series, vol. 5, 164; *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean* XVI.31. Augustine also acknowledged social elements in fasting—fasting in ways that not tempt or offend a weaker brother, *On the Morals of the Manichaeans* XIV. Miles sees

soul may be more humbled in prayer.”⁴⁹ In his *On the Usefulness of Fasting*, Augustine described fasting as “the strengthening of the soul” and “the cheating of the flesh.”⁵⁰

Why, therefore, is it of benefit to us to abstain somewhat from food and from carnal pleasure? The flesh draws one to the earth. The mind tends upward; it is caught up by love, but it is slowed down by weight.⁵¹

In an apparent allusion to the charioteer in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (253c), he likens his flesh to a beast of burden able to ‘prance about’ and throw its rider headlong off the path leading to the heavenly city of Jerusalem. He asks rhetorically, “shall I not restrain my flesh by fasting when it becomes unmanageable in this fashion?”⁵² When one withdraws from the joys of the flesh, joy of the mind is gained.⁵³

More specifically, Augustine believed that fasting as the subjugation of the body allowed one to check concupiscence.⁵⁴ In his dispute with the Pelagians Augustine even enjoins Basil’s assertion that fasting was the rule in paradise before the fall (Genesis 2:17), and thus marks the way by which we may return:

Saint Basil says to you that we have contracted the disease of sin because Eve refused to fast from the forbidden tree. He adds that we fell from paradise because we did not fast and he prescribes fasting in order that we may return there.⁵⁵

Unlike subsequent thinkers like Athanasius in the East however, Augustine never really reflects on the implications for the human body in returning to the garden.

Ambrose’s ‘Porphyrian asceticism’ and Stoicism as contributing factors to Augustine’s ambivalence toward the body, *Augustine on the Body*, 48, 59.

⁴⁹ *Reply to Faustus* XXX.5, in *NPNF* First Series, vol. 4, 233.

⁵⁰ *The Usefulness of Fasting* 1, in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, trans. Mary Sarah Muldowney et al., vol. 16, *Treatises on Various Subjects* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1952), 403. See also Robert P. Kennedy, “Fasting,” in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 354-355.

⁵¹ *Usefulness of Fasting* 2, in *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 16, 406.

⁵² *Usefulness of Fasting* 3, in *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 16, 407-408.

⁵³ *Usefulness of Fasting* 5.

⁵⁴ *Perfection in Righteousness* VIII.17. Augustine however gave little by way of instruction regarding fasting. See Miles, *Augustine on the Body*, 76.

⁵⁵ *Answer to Julian* I.32, in *Works of St. Augustine*, vol. I/24, *Answer to the Pelagians II*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998), 291.

Indeed, fasting as a ‘return to paradise’ was never a theme for him, much less the possibility of putting on a little of that bodily incorruption Adam and Eve enjoyed before they sinned. The mature Augustine preferred to emphasize the resurrection of body to come.⁵⁶ Thus, any notion of remaking of the body apart from the radical transformation of our bodies at the resurrection is not considered.

Thus, in Chapter 5 I consider the beliefs surrounding the fasting practices of St. Antony as expounded by Athanasius. To be sure, it will be equally necessary to extricate Athanasius’ theology from Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrines, as Athanasius, like Augustine, alluded to Greek metaphors. I will show that Antony’s ascetic discipline of fasting allowed him to ‘remake’ his body by heightening the body’s defense against the corruption natural to it, thereby attaining the aging retardation effects confirmed by contemporary science. However, while Antony was aware of bodily benefits achieved by such a regime, his fasting was subsumed under the primary goal of reestablishing the proper order of body and soul where his Word-guided soul rightly ruled over his body, a condition enjoyed in part by prelapsarian Adam. Yet, Antony also engaged in fasting with a view to that final incorruptibility to be enjoyed at the resurrection, demonstrating that his regime was inscribed by the drama of creation, fall, and redemption. As such, fasting may serve as a particular Christian practice, which, while offering the possibility of an extended life by retarding aging, is nevertheless subsumed under the Christian “struggle to holiness.”

In Chapter 6 I balance Athanasius’ discussion of the longevity in reference to the first Adam with a more focused Christological on the second Adam, the real man Jesus Christ. Here I draw upon the theology of Karl Barth, whose reflections on the nature of human limitedness take a heavy Christological focus. I discuss how Antony’s model of fasting and its relationship to the disorder experienced in body and soul provide the basis for evaluating the current attempts to modulate human aging, with a particular emphasis on current attempts to pharmacologically mimic the effects of caloric restriction. The shortcomings of the scientific approach are thrown into sharp relief by interacting with Barth’s conceptions of ‘sloth’ and ‘care’

⁵⁶ *City of God* XIII.16-17; XXII.26.

construed as a disorder of body and soul—the very disorder addressed by Antony’s ascetic regime—a disorder leading to the fear of death and a dissatisfaction with one’s limited temporal existence. Hence, I conclude that fasting, though not without the dangers of abuse, can be practiced as a discipline which is important for the development of character, a discipline which also entails the possibility of attenuating the aging process. Finally, I situate the Christian discipline of fasting within the communal context, with particular reference to the practices of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Chapter 1: The Science of Aging

“Oh that there were a medicine curing age . . .”¹

Regimen of Health of Salerno

“For my part I would rather not be old so long than be old before my time.”²

Cicero

Prolongevity theories, if not viewed as pure legend, have typically been regarded as an admixture of pseudoscience and spirituality, conjuring up images of the alchemist laboring over a concoction which might result in that elusive *elixir vitae*. Though theories for prolongevity still persist, they seldom escape criticism.³ While attempts to greatly extend human life are not new, the hope of achieving a significantly longer life through science is no longer considered ridiculous. Aging researcher Steven N. Austad appears equally optimistic. “After centuries of hokum and false hope, aging finally may be ready to yield to scientific manipulation.”⁴ Others conclude that “the unquestioned conviction that we cannot alter aging and the cellular underpinnings of the diseases that accompany the aging process is no longer strictly tenable.”⁵ Researchers have taken note of a conceptual shift in our understanding of aging, observing that “the possibility of extending the maximum human lifespan has gone from legend to laboratory,”⁶ leading many scientists in the fields of gerontology and

¹ *Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum*, in *The School of Salerno: Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum*, ed. F. R. Packard and F. H. Garrison, trans. John Harrington (New York: Hoeber, 1920), 112.

² *Cato maior de Senectute* X, 32, trans. W. A. Falconer (London: William Heinemann, 1923), 41.

³ See for instance Gerald J. Gruman, “A History of Ideas About the Prolongation of Life: The Evolution of Prolongevity Hypotheses to 1800,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 56 (1966): 10-13; 20-28; 49-74.

⁴ Steven N. Austad, *Why We Age: What Science is Discovering About the Body's Journey Through Life* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1997), 221.

⁵ Banks and Fossel, “Telomeres, Cancer, and Aging,” 1348.

⁶ Dwayne A. Banks and Michael Fossel, “Telomeres, Cancer, and Aging: Altering the Human Life Span,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 278 (1997): 1345.

molecular biology to acknowledge that, while the prospects of retarding aging are extremely difficult, the idea is more than a dream.

Within the last several years scientists have been able to significantly extend the maximum life spans of mice and other multi-cellular organisms.⁷ Two researchers at the University of Chicago claim that

the quest for immortality has now moved from folklore to legend to a frenetic scientific search for biochemical keys that will unlock the secrets of aging. . . . Some of these chemical compounds will probably be available during the lifetimes of most younger people alive today.⁸

While most shy away from claims of earthly immortality, the possibility of greatly extended life spans appears possible through aging research.⁹ However, increasing the maximum life span will likely involve more than reengineering a few genes. Many researchers acknowledge that since the aging process is stochastic, influenced by genetic, epigenetic, and environmental factors, that any progress in extending the human life span will be the results of an interdisciplinary effort.¹⁰ Nevertheless, these laboratory successes have lead to the formation of several start-up research companies devoted to uncovering and ultimately slowing the human aging process, including Elixir Pharmaceuticals, Juvenon, Biomarker Pharmaceuticals, and Centagenetix.¹¹ Though there are numerous anti-aging products on the market today in the form of anti-oxidants, vitamins, and hormone replacement therapies—none of

⁷ Two such studies of multicellular species, the *Drosophila melanogaster* and *Caenorhabditis elegans* are cited in Banks and Fossel, "Telomeres, Cancer, and Aging," 1345-1348. Others include B. Lakowski and S. Hekimi, "Determination of lifespan in *Caenorhabditis elegans* by four clock genes," *Science* 272 (1996): 1010-1013; J. J. Ewbank, et al., "Structural and functional conservation of the *Caenorhabditis elegans* timing gene *clk-1*" *Science* 275 (1997): 980-983; and P. L. Larson, P. S. Albert, D. L. Riddle, "Genes that regulate both development and longevity in *Caenorhabditis elegans*," *Genetics* 139 (1995): 1567-1583.

⁸ S. Jay Olshansky and Bruce A. Carnes, *The Quest for Immortality: Science at the Frontiers of Aging* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 148. Not all scientists are convinced. Leonard Hayflick, co-founder and name bearer of one of the most significant scientific discoveries in molecular biology this century, the Hayflick Limit, is dubious that retarding the aging process is attainable or desirable. *How and Why We Age* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 6.

⁹ See Austad, *Why We Age*, 221; Banks and Fossel, "Telomeres, Cancer, and Aging," 1348.

¹⁰ S. Michal Jazwinski, "Longevity, Genes, and Aging," *Science* 273 (July 1996): 54-59.

¹¹ Daniel Callahan notes that The Alliance for Aging Research reported the existence of 25 firms devoted to aging research, or 'gero-techs' in 2000. See Daniel Perry, "The Rise of the Gero-Techs," *Genetic Engineering News* 20 (2000): 57-58.

which have been proven effective—these companies are devoted to change this by developing pharmaceuticals to retard the aging process.¹²

Life-Extension and Anti-Aging Technology

In looking at the current state of affairs in human longevity, it is clear that we are living longer. It will therefore be critical to understand exactly what is meant by life extension, and how it differs from the events and developments that have lead to greater life expectancies over the last century. To this end, some terminology is in order.

Life Expectancy and Life Span

In the United States the average human life expectancy has steadily increased from 46.3 years in 1900 to nearly 80 years today.¹³ Life expectancy is a highly complex statistical figure that measures the average lifespan for a population based upon the number of people alive at each age and the probability of survival for another year.¹⁴ It is generally agreed that this increase is due in large part to the successful treatment of numerous diseases, improvements in sanitation and general living conditions.¹⁵ Indeed, The President's Council on Bioethics points out that these figures do not represent a conquest of aging, but rather reflect "an overcoming of the risks of dying young, and especially the dangers of infancy."¹⁶ There is no real evidence that science has done anything to alter the aging process itself. Scientists observe that "we live longer now not because we have altered the way we age but because we

¹² S. Jay Olshansky, Leonard Hayflick, and Bruce A. Carnes, "No Truth to the Fountain of Youth," *Scientific American* 286 (2002): 78-81.

¹³ See <http://www.demog.berkeley.edu/~andrew/1918/figure2.html> and <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/us.html> as quoted in Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, 57. Olshansky notes that the life expectancy for babies born in 2000 is 79.6 and 73.5 years for females and males respectively, in *Quest*, 81.

¹⁴ Olshansky, *Quest*, 80-81. For a complete listing of The Life Table, see 239-242. English actuary Benjamin Gompertz is generally recognized for discovering a mathematical formula for aging and longevity statistics. See "On the Nature of the Function Expressive of the Law of Human Mortality and on a New Mode of Determining Life Contingencies," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 115 (1825): 513-585.

¹⁵ Olshansky, *Quest*, 72-73.

¹⁶ President's Council, "The Promise and Challenge of Aging Research," December 2002, <http://bioethicsprint.bioethics.gov/background/agingresearch.html>.

have altered the way we live.”¹⁷ Thus, while the average *life expectancy* has been increasing, the maximum human *life span*—the greatest span of time between one’s birth and death, around 120 years—has not. Several years ago it was observed that “unlike life expectancy, the span of life does not seem to have increased noticeably during the course of history.”¹⁸ As life expectancies continue to rise—albeit very slowly—a larger proportion of people living longer, approaching the biological limit of life. This phenomenon is referred to as a rectangularization¹⁹ of the life expectancy curve—a compression in the distribution of life expectancy nearer the unchanging maximum life span of 120 years.²⁰ This rectangularization is visible in the following cumulative distribution where the percentage individuals surviving to later ages increases, falling off sharply however as the maximum biological age is approached.²¹

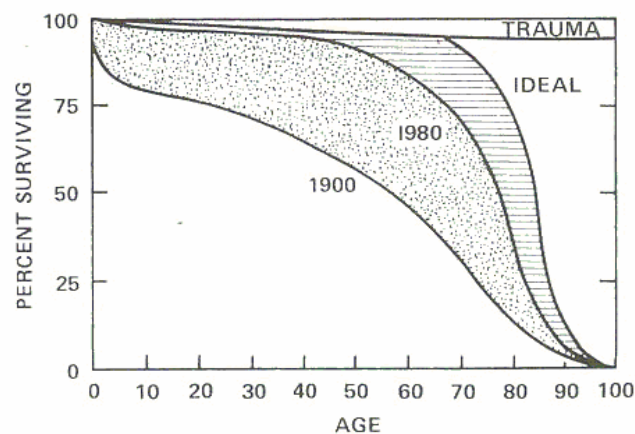


Figure 1: The Increasingly Rectangular Survival Curve

¹⁷ Olshansky, Hayflick, and Carnes, “No Truth,” 79.

¹⁸ Louis I. Dublin, “Outlook for Longevity in the United States,” *Newsletter Gerontological Society* 4, no. 2 (1957): 3.

¹⁹ Banks and Fossel, “Telomeres, Cancer, and Aging,” 1348; William R. Clark, *A Means to an End: The Biological Basis of Aging and Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9, 11, 197, 204. Hayflick, *How and Why*, 84-85, 330-331; Fries, “Aging, Natural Death” 130-135. Not all agree however that life expectancy is approaching a maximum limit. See Jim Oeppen and James W. Vaupel, “Broken Limits to Life Expectancy,” *Science* 296 (2002): 1029-1032.

²⁰ Jeanne Calment, born in Arles, France, lived to be 122 years old.

²¹ Taken from Fries, “Aging,” 131.

This sharpness with which this curve falls between 80 and 90 years represents a compression or a notable ‘rectangularization’ in the overall population survival rate as a larger percentage of the population lives closer to the biological limit. The aforementioned advances in medicine, hygiene, and a reduction of the infant mortality rate show the dramatic affect from the curve at the turn of the century. The probability distribution function of death thus would represent a ‘spike’ somewhere around 80 to 85 years of age, though this spike may actually occur at a later age, closer to the biological limit. Figure 2 represents a hypothetical probability distribution function in the absence of premature death.²²

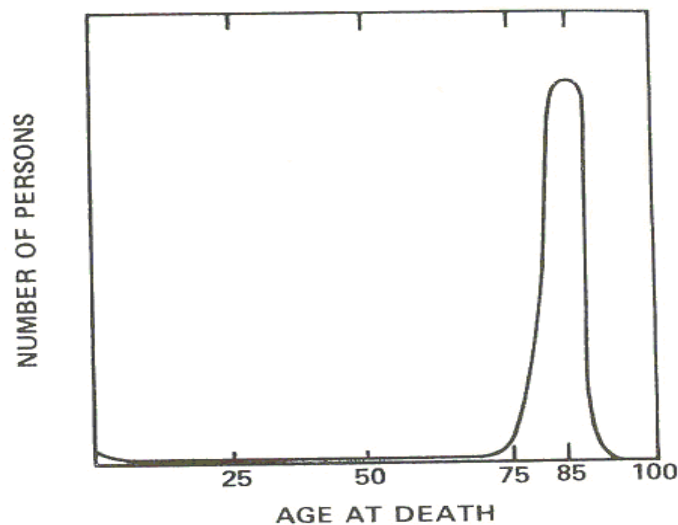


Figure 2: Mortality According to Age in the Absence of Premature Death

While Figure 1 empirically demonstrates an increasing rectangularization over time, current data suggests that degree of compression in individual morbidity has not materialized to the extent predicted. Rather, increased life expectancies have been accompanied by increased periods of decline, providing one motive for aging retardation research. While there has obviously been some compression in morbidity, many believe that only limited increases in life expectancy are possible. S. Jay Olshansky and other gerontologists contend that even marginal increases in life expectancy would require the infant mortality rate to continue to fall at a fast pace.²³

²² Taken from Fries, “Aging,” 134.

²³ Olshansky, *Quest*, 86; “Practical Limits to Life Expectancy in France,” in *Longevity: To the Limit and Beyond*, ed. Jean-Marine Robine, James W. Vaupel and Michael Bernard Jeune (Berlin, NY:

They assert that even “a life expectancy at birth of 100 years requires that almost every cause of death that exists today would have to be reduced dramatically or eliminated altogether.”²⁴ If a longer healthier life is to be achieved, some other means must be developed.²⁵

Hence, waging a war against human aging itself appears to be one possible way to significantly extend human life beyond maximum limits. Olshansky and Carnes assert that “additional significant increases in life expectancy can only come from advances in biomedical technology that alter the course of aging itself.”²⁶ Steven Austad agrees: “The only hope for a dramatic increase in human longevity is new insight into the nature of aging itself and the development of treatments to slow the overall process.”²⁷ However, Zhores A. Medvedev observes:

One thing is certain, however: even a cursory review of what we know about the structural basis of aging reveals that such an extension will not be as easy and as straightforward as the procedures available to control single-cause diseases. It is, therefore, not surprising that conventional health care (which by its very nature is limited to prevention or cure of single cause diseases) can only bring about an increase of average but not of maximum life expectancy of individuals.²⁸

It is also evident that any form of life extension must be accompanied by an acceptable *quality* of life. Gerald J. Gruman, who coined the term ‘prolongevityism,’ conceded that “nearly all prolongevityists have had in mind not merely an increase in time *per se* but an extension of the healthy and productive period of life.”²⁹

Olshansky and Carnes put it more forcefully:

Springer Press, 1997): 1-10. See also John R. Wilmoth, “The Future of Human Longevity: A Demographer’s Perspective,” *Science* 280 (1998): 395-397.

²⁴ Olshansky, *Quest*, 98. For a more detailed report, see S. J. Olshansky, B. A. Carnes, and C. Cassel, “In Search of Methuselah: Estimating the Upper Limits to Human Longevity,” in *Science* 250 (1990): 634-640. They conclude: “Barring major advances in the development and use of life-extending technologies or the alteration of human aging at the molecular level, the period of rapid increases in life expectancy in developed nations has come to an end,” 637.

²⁵ Olshansky, *Quest*, 86.

²⁶ *Quest*, 135.

²⁷ Austad, *Why We Age*, 14.

²⁸ Z. A. Medvedev, “The Structural Basis of Aging,” in *Life Span Extension: Consequences and Open Questions*, ed. Frédérick C. Ludwig (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1991), 10-11.

²⁹ Gruman, “A History of Ideas,” 8.

The primary goal of biomedical research and efforts to slow aging should not be the mere extension of life. It should be to prolong the duration of *healthy* life.³⁰

Certainly, no one is interested in prolonging the period of physical decline, or increasing the period of dependency on medical equipment, though this outcome is far from guaranteed. Hence, an increasing amount of research devoted to identifying the mechanisms of human aging, in hopes that they one day might be under our discrete control. Therefore, the term life extension, as employed in this thesis, means the attempt to increase human longevity by retarding the human aging process, in distinction from treating discrete diseases and disorders. As will become evident however, the aging process is enormously complex, generating numerous theories that reveal anything but a consensus among the scientific community.

Aging, Senescence, and Disease

Part of the problem in defining aging is that the aforementioned advances in the health care, hygiene, the working and living environmental and medical advances have made growing old a rather recent phenomenon. Prior to the nineteenth century, not many lived long enough to experience significant aging, yet everyone ages. “It is ironic that such a ubiquitous phenomenon as aging is so controversial regarding its definition and measurement.”³¹ Many believe that aging begins when one reaches reproductive maturity. Perhaps the most obvious thing that may be said of aging is that it occurs over time, though aging is more than simply a chronological phenomenon.³² Gerontologist Tom Kirkwood prefers John Maynard Smith’s definition as satisfactorily succinct: “Aging is a progressive, generalized impairment of function resulting in an increasing probability of death.”³³ Zhores Medvedev’s

³⁰ Olshansky, “No Truth,” 80. See also Clark, *Means*, 205. “Almost everyone would agree that what we would really like to do is extend the middle years of life, when we are still vigorous and able to experience life at its fullest.”

³¹ Donald K. Ingram, “Is Aging Measurable?” in *Life Span Extension: Consequences and Open Questions*, ed. Frédérick C. Ludwig (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1991), 18.

³² Even on this point there is not agreement. See Robert Arking, *Biology of Aging: Observations and Principles*, 2nd ed. (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates Inc., 1998), 11-12.

³³ Tom Kirkwood, *The Time of Our Lives* (London: Phoenix, 1999), 35. He does not provide the specific source for Maynard Smith’s definition.

definition is also apposite—“the inability of individual organisms to maintain their integrity through time.”³⁴ Similarly, Leonard Hayflick asserts that “aging represents losses in normal function that occur after sexual maturation and continue up to the time of maximum longevity for members of a species.”³⁵ Biologist Robert Arking has coined an acronym, CPID, in describing aging as cumulative, progressive, intrinsic, and deleterious.³⁶ Despite the varying definitions, there is general agreement that human aging is a gradual, cumulative process, eventually increasing the likelihood of death. Another term used when discussing the aging process is *senescence*. Often aging and senescence are used interchangeably.³⁷ Unfortunately, there is as little agreement on the use of senescence as there is with the term aging. Scientists generally favor one term to the exclusion of the other, given the ambiguities inherent in each.³⁸ William Clark has suggested that senescence be employed when referring to the biology of aging, though it is difficult to distinguish his definition of senescence—“the increasing likelihood of death of an individual with advancing age”—from the aforementioned definitions of aging.³⁹ Given these ambiguities, I will use the terms interchangeably.

Adding to the ambiguities and complexities surrounding aging is the relationship between aging and disease. Though the vast majority of those working in the fields of aging and gerontology would not consider aging a disease, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish one from the other as knowledge of pathologies and disease etiologies increase.⁴⁰ While some have argued that aging should be considered as a disease,⁴¹ two particular criteria that apply to aging—intrinsicality

³⁴ Medvedev, “Structural Basis,” 9.

³⁵ Hayflick, *How and Why*, 15.

³⁶ Arking, *Biology of Aging*, 12.

³⁷ Arking, *Biology of Aging*, 12.

³⁸ For example, Hayflick, for instance, avoids the term ‘senescence’ due to its ambiguities, *How and Why*, xix. Arking, *Biology of Aging*, 11, however observes that Caleb Finch uses the term ‘senescence’ exclusively in an effort to avoid the ambiguities inherent in term ‘aging.’

³⁹ Clark, *Means*, 8.

⁴⁰ See Blumenthal, “Aging-Disease Dichotomy,” 138-145.

⁴¹ See Blumenthal, “Aging-Disease Dichotomy,” 144-145; Arthur L. Caplan, “The ‘Unnaturalness’ of Aging—A Sickness Unto Death?” in *Concepts of Health and Disease: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Arthur L. Caplan, H. Tristram Englehardt Jr., and James J. McCartney (London: Addison-Wesley, 1981), 725-737; C. Boorse, “On the Distinction Between Illness and Disease,” *Philosophy and Public*

and universality—still carry enough weight to maintain a distinction.⁴² That is, all human beings, without exception, age, as it is part of our very biological makeup, while the same cannot be said of disease. One issue behind this distinction involves the battle for legitimacy on the scientific landscape and issues of government funding. Aging again underlines the difficulties in drawing a distinction between natural and unnatural, or therapy and enhancement in determining what type of action is warranted. Classifying or recasting aging as a disease may influence public perception, though considering aging as a natural process has done little to prevent research on slowing the aging process down.

Though it is still possible to draw a distinction between aging and disease, it is clear that they are certainly related. It is generally accepted that aging brings an increase susceptibility to certain diseases. Zhores Medvedev offers a helpful insight concerning the relationship between aging and disease:

. . . aging is biologically distinct from disease. In contrast to most diseases, its primary processes entail random events that affect simultaneously a considerable variety of structures. The more single-cause diseases are controlled, the more aging becomes the main factor determining lifespan.⁴³

It can be said then, that attempts to manipulate aging are tantamount to treating aging methodologically *as a disease* by seeking its underlying causes in hopes of mitigating them to a certain degree, even though most in the scientific community would assert a fundamental difference between aging and disease. The following conclusion of an aging retardation study serves as an example.

When single genes are changed, animals that should be old stay young. In humans these old mutants would be analogous to a ninety year old who looks and feels forty-five. On this basis we begin to think of ageing as a disease that can be cured, or at least postponed.⁴⁴

Affairs 5 (1975): 49-68. Haylick, *How and Why*, 45, notes that some studies have found that more than seventy-five percent of the oldest old—those over the age of 85—have between three and nine pathological conditions.

⁴² Blumenthal, “Aging-Disease Dichotomy,” 141.

⁴³ Medvedev, “Structural Basis,” 11.

⁴⁴ Leonard Guarante and Cynthia Kenyon, “Genetic Pathways that Regulate Ageing in Model Organisms,” *Nature* 408 (2000): 261.

This statement appears innocuous enough, yet as will become evident in the next chapter, the aging disease distinction takes on added emotive force in contemporary moral debates in attempting to establish a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate goals of science. Having briefly considered aging, senescence and the aging disease distinction, I turn to the theories of human aging.

Theories of Aging

It has been recently noted that when it comes to the study of aging, “the number and range of aging theories indeed rather stupefies the imagination.”⁴⁵ The ways in which aging theories can be grouped appears to be almost as numerous as the number of aging theories in existence. Despite the relatively young fields of biogerontology and molecular biology, Medvedev observes that “almost every important discovery in cellular or molecular biology has stimulated a new family of theories of ageing, or new advanced versions of older theories.”⁴⁶ Highly skeptical of any unified, ‘single cause’ theory of aging, and dissatisfied with the common demarcation of aging theories—typically along stochastic, programmed, and evolutionary lines—Medvedev has recently classified more than 300 aging theories based upon methods of study and observation.⁴⁷ He divides aging theories into seven categories: theories based on age changes, primary damage, genetic program, evolutionary, tissue-specific, mathematical and physical-mathematical, and unified theories.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Austad, *Why We Age*, 53.

⁴⁶ Zhores A. Medvedev, “An Attempt at a Rational Classification of Theories of Ageing,” *Biological Reviews of the Cambridge Philosophical Society* 65 (1990): 375.

⁴⁷ Some have divided aging theories into damage and programmed theories. See Banks and Fossel, “Telomeres, Cancer, and Aging,” 1345. Others have divided evolutionary theories of aging into two classes: optimality and deleterious mutation. See L. Partridge and N. H. Barton, “Optimality, Mutation and the Evolution of Aging,” *Nature* 362 (1993): 305-311. Robert Arking classifies fourteen basic theories on aging in *Biology of Aging*, 372-375. Other breakdowns include those by Leonard Hayflick, “Theories of Biological Aging,” *Experimental Gerontology* 20 (1985): 145-149; J. L. Esposito, *The Obsolete Self: Philosophical Dimensions of Aging* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); R. W. Hart and A. Turturro, “Theories of Aging,” in *Review of Biological Research in Aging*, ed. M. Rothstein, vol. 1 (New York: Alan R. Liss, 1983), 5-18.

⁴⁸ Medvedev, “Rational Classification,” 378.

Theories Based on Age Changes

Medvedev notes that the first category—theories based on age changes—is by far the largest, given the rapid accumulation of knowledge of age changes on different levels.⁴⁹ The problem however, is that the ever-increasing number observations of aging tend to be cited as the *cause* of aging. Medvedev refers to August Weismann's 'wear and tear' theory of aging, first posited long before the discovery of cellular function and DNA.⁵⁰ This category can be subdivided further, depending upon the level at which studies are conducted (e.g. macromolecules, proteins, DNA, chromosomes, cellular, or organ and tissue function). Medvedev divides this category into seven sub-groups.⁵¹ However, while several observations of aging are undisputable facts, says Medvedev, the underlying question of why these changes occur, often remains unanswered.

Damage Theories

The most widely-accepted damage theory of aging is Denham Harman's free radical theory.⁵² This theory associates aging with the accumulation of genetic damage caused by these radicals which over time ultimately leads to the failure of cells, tissue, organs, and finally the individual.⁵³ Free radicals are the natural by-product the a cell's mitochondria, which functions as the cell's energy production center. It has been estimated that these free oxygen radicals damage the DNA residing in our cells around 10,000 times per day.⁵⁴ Additional support for this oxidative stress theory comes from the observed relationship between life span and metabolic rate or

⁴⁹ For a brief listing, see Table 2, 380-381.

⁵⁰ Medvedev, "Rational Classification," 377.

⁵¹ Medvedev, "Rational Classification," 378-379.

⁵² See Denham Harman, "Aging, A Theory Based On Free Radical and Radiation Chemistry," *Journal of Gerontology* 11 (1956): 298-300; "The Aging Process," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA* 78 (1981): 7123-7128; "Free Radical Theory of Aging: Consequences of Mitochondrial Aging," *Age* 6 (1983): 86-94; "Aging: Overview," *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 928 (2001): 1-21; See also Arking, *Biology of Aging*, 398-413. For a popular level treatment of oxidative stress and implications of aging, see Austad, *Why We Age*, 84, Clark, *Means*, 155ff; Hayflick, *How and Why*, 244-248; Kirkwood, *Time*, 114-116; Olshansky, *Quest*, 155, 196-199.

⁵³ Olshansky, *Quest*, 197-198.

⁵⁴ Austad, *Why We Age*, 129. See also Bruce N. Ames, Mark K. Shigenaga, and Tony M. Hagen, "Oxidants, Antioxidants, and the Degenerative Diseases of Aging," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, USA* 90 (1993): 7915-7922.

the rate of production of free radicals. William R. Clark observes that animals with a higher metabolic rate have shorter life spans than those with lower rates.⁵⁵ Moreover, he points to studies that have shown the mitochondria from older cells tend to ‘leak’ more radicals per unit of oxygen consumed.⁵⁶ Even if the accumulation of cellular damage has not yet been identified as the *cause* of aging, it does appear to contribute to the degenerative diseases associated with aging, like cancer, cardiovascular disease, and immune-system decline.⁵⁷ Thus, while these damaging effects are observable and measurable, Medvedev notes that damage theories in general “cannot explain why age changes accumulate, or why the ageing process has so many different forms and rates.”⁵⁸ Attempts to explain these phenomena have been undertaken by genetic program theories, Medvedev’s third category.

Genetic Program Theories

The existence of genetic control in aging, observes Medvedev, is evident in the inheritance of longevity traits within populations, and indicates that there is a relationship between our genes and aging, though this relationship is extraordinarily complex. Here too, are numerous theories. Medvedev notes that many attempts have been made to locate genes which directly contribute to aging or longevity. Cell biologist William R. Clark for instance, believes that the discoveries of genes which lead to progerias⁵⁹—premature senility in children—suggest that a few malfunctioning genes can significantly influence the aging processes in the individual. “. . . the incredible spectrum of aging-like phenotypic [observable] changes wrought in the single-gene progerias suggests that the actual number of genes [associated with aging] may not have to be terribly large.”⁶⁰ Clark has posited the existence of senescence ‘effector’ and ‘resistor’ genes that influence senescence

⁵⁵ Clark, *Means*, 156-157. See especially Figure 9.2. Hayflick, *How and Why*, 247, concurs.

⁵⁶ Clark, *Means*, 157.

⁵⁷ Ames, et al., “Oxidants,” 7915.

⁵⁸ Medvedev, “Rational Classification,” 383.

⁵⁹ Two common progerias are Werner’s Syndrome, and Hutchinson-Gilford Progeria Syndrome (HGPS).

⁶⁰ Clark, *Means*, 93. Steven Austad contends that progeria is not the same as aging, but merely caricatures it, *Why We Age*, 46.

at the cellular level.⁶¹ As an illustration that aging theories are not mutually exclusive, Clark believes that oxidative or free radical damage is one of these senescence programs that has likely been around since the beginning of the evolutionary process.⁶² Hence, these genetically-driven cellular senescence programs lead to programmed cellular death (apoptosis), which in turn leads to a gradual deterioration of the tissues and organs composed by these cells, leading eventually to the death of the individual by “natural causes.”⁶³ Clark believes that the program for cellular senescence is present in every cell—even the apparently ‘immortal’ early embryonic cells.⁶⁴

Of particular interest to Clark are the earliest stages of human cellular formation. He notes that in the process of cellular formation from the single cell zygote to the group of embryonal stem (ES) cells attached to the uterine wall, that these ES cells eventually lose their replicative immortality. These germ cells, capable of indefinite replication, eventually become somatic cells—the cells of which our bodies are composed—and lose their immortality. Clark notes that “it is of great interest to cell biologists that ES cells seem to represent a state of truly inherent immortality.”⁶⁵ Clark suspects that this immortality is lost when the growing embryonal cell mass implants in the uterine wall.⁶⁶ Specifically, Clark attributes this ‘gradual’ loss of immortality to the decreased efficaciousness of a senescence repressor gene(s). Consistent with evolutionary biology then, the repressor genes would effectively limit cellular senescence initially as the zygote develops into an embryo achieving uterine implantation, and then gradually allow cellular senescence until the organism reaches sexual maturity, finally culminating in increased cellular senescence after the

⁶¹ Clark, *Means*, 191.

⁶² Clark, *Means*, 191.

⁶³ Clark, *Means*, 33. Elsewhere, Clark defines natural death—“for lack of a better term”—as “death that results from purely internal causes such as genetic disease, heart attack, cancer, or other age-related disorders,” 7.

⁶⁴ Clark, *Means*, 65. Clark also acknowledges the ambiguous and complex relationship between cellular senescence and aging in an organism. “Clearly there is no defined program, in the sense of a series of steps that are executed in a set sequence, eventually culminating in death of an organism. Rather, a collection of senescence-inducing mechanisms, based on cellular senescence and leading to the eventual extinction of the somatic organism, has become part of the eukaryotic heritage,” 37.

⁶⁵ Clark, *Means*, 62.

⁶⁶ Clark, *Means*, 62.

reproductive period has passed. Clark believes this process may hold the key to aging. “This increased understanding of the gain and loss of immortality during embryonic development provides a possible basis for understanding, at the mechanistic level, the relationship of senescence and lifespan in the adult.”⁶⁷

Clark’s theory represents one of many which fit into Medvedev’s genetic program theory, yet still leaves questions unanswered. Many remain unconvinced. Biologist Steven Austad is skeptical that a few genes could profoundly affect the aging rate of humans.⁶⁸ Others are doubtful of the actual existence of what some call ‘gerontogenes’⁶⁹ or ‘virtual gerontogenes,’⁷⁰ denying the physical reality of aging genes yet at the same time acknowledging an “emergent functional property of a number of genes which influence ageing.”⁷¹ Even if such genes exist, their number may be inordinately large. Geneticist George M. Martin has estimated that as many as 7,000 of our 100,000⁷² genes may have an influence on our aging.⁷³

Evolutionary Theories

Evolutionary theories of aging ask more than *how* aging occurs, but rather *why* aging happens. Moreover, evolutionary theories must account for the variation in life spans across different species.⁷⁴ One of the earliest evolutionary aging theories came from August Weismann, who asserted that, because reproduction generates new bodies which must survive in a hostile environment, death was nature’s way of discarding old and worn out bodies.⁷⁵ Under this scheme, natural selection would favor species whose lifespan was becoming too short in a particular environment with lifespan

⁶⁷ Clark, *Means*, 66.

⁶⁸ Austad, *Why We Age*, 45, citing G. M. Martin et al., “Genetic Analysis of Ageing: Role of Oxidative Damage and Environmental Stresses,” *Nature Genetics* 13 (1996): 25-34.

⁶⁹ Suresh I. S. Rattan, “Ageing and Immortality,” *BioEssays* 4 (1986): 82-83.

⁷⁰ Suresh I. S. Rattan, “Gerontogenes: real or virtual?” *The Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology Journal* 9 (1995): 284-286.

⁷¹ Suresh I. S. Rattan, “Gene Therapy for Ageing: Mission Impossible?” *European Journal of the Genetics Society* 3 (1997), 27.

⁷² More accurate estimates suggest that there are approximately 30,000 genes in the human genome.

⁷³ Austad, *Why We Age*, 47.

⁷⁴ Medvedev, “Rational Classification,” 376; Partridge, “Optimality,” 305.

⁷⁵ Olshansky, *Quest*, 58.

extension while those species displaying excess longevity would eventually succumb to the hostile environment.⁷⁶ British Nobel laureate Sir Peter Medawar later developed an aging theory that has since been coined the genetic ‘dust-beneath-the-cupboard’ theory where natural selection effectively delays the genetic expression of harmful diseases into the post-reproductive period of life.⁷⁷ A few years later, George C. Williams developed and modified Medawar’s idea of harmful genes with his own theory of *antagonistic pleiotropy*, where genes beneficial to an organism early in life mutate and actually harm the organism in later life.⁷⁸ But perhaps one of the most generally accepted evolutionary theories of aging today is Tom Kirkwood’s ‘disposable soma theory.’⁷⁹

Kirkwood claims that his theory best answers *why* we age.⁸⁰ We grow old and die, says Kirkwood, because we are disposable. That is, once our bodies—composed largely of somatic cells—reach sexual reproductive maturity, they are no longer needed by our germ cells—the cells that make up eggs in females and sperm in males—and hence, become ‘disposable.’ Kirkwood says, “. . . we are disposable. And the saddest thing is that this assessment of our disposability is made by none other than our very own genes.”⁸¹ Olshansky and Carnes largely agree, likening our bodies to “genetic transport vehicles” on which our genes have been hitching a ride.⁸² They conclude: “It follows that it is genes which are immortal, not the bodies that carry them.”⁸³ Thus, there is a trade off between our somatic cells and germ-line cells, between the maintenance of our bodies and germ-line reproduction. According

⁷⁶ Olshansky, *Quest*, 58. For complete details, see August Weismann, *Essays Upon Heredity and Kindred Biological Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891).

⁷⁷ Olshansky, *Quest*, 59-61; Kirkwood, *Time*, 78-79.

⁷⁸ George C. Williams, “Pleiotropy, Natural Selection and the Evolution of Senescence,” *Evolution* II (1957): 398-411.

⁷⁹ This theory has been classified as an ‘optimality’ evolutionary account of aging by Partridge and Barton, “Optimality,” 306.

⁸⁰ Kirkwood disputes any existence of a ‘death gene,’ claiming that such a hypothesis is based on the incorrect assumption that natural selection works only ‘for the good of the species’ at the expense of the individual.

⁸¹ Kirkwood, *Time*, 63.

⁸² Olshansky, *Quest*, 51.

⁸³ Olshansky, *Quest*, 52. Asking us to adopt the perspective of our genes, they conclude, “your goal, as genes, it to make it to the next generation,” 55.

to Kirkwood, somatic (bodily) maintenance is very costly, therefore once the germ line has had an opportunity to propagate through sexual reproduction, the resources required for continued maintenance of the body gradually fall off. Germ-line cells, those which are replicatively immortal, no longer need our somas (bodies) once we reach reproductive maturity. In the words of Olshansky, “the price we pay for sex is death.”⁸⁴ More importantly, asserts Kirkwood, the disposable soma theory tells us about aging itself.

Above all, the theory tells us that ageing is probably due to the gradual and progressive accumulation of damage in the cells and tissues of our bodies as we live our lives. It tells us that ageing is unlikely to be caused by only a single mechanism . . .⁸⁵

Here again there is an overlap in theories, for Kirkwood also believes that aging is stochastic or random, an accumulation of oxidative cell damage produced in mitochondria and errors in protein synthesis, thus qualifying as a damage theory. The knowledge of these processes lead Kirkwood to conclude that “*there is probably no single mechanism of ageing.*”⁸⁶ Kirkwood is therefore highly skeptical of any genetic program theory of death, asserting that “. . . our genes are not actually programmed to cause the breakdown of the body. Our genes are programmed for survival.”⁸⁷ While acknowledging the basic biology of cellular senescence and the scientific search for genes that might be activated by this process, Kirkwood points out that these genes (if discovered) would not necessarily *cause* aging. Moreover, while acknowledging that the accumulation of errors might lead to damage which “activates genetic mechanisms that repress cell divisions,”⁸⁸ he asserts that the relationship between cellular senescence (through apoptosis) and aging is far from clear. “There is no evidence that ageing is driven by apoptosis, even though apoptosis does occur more readily with age in some tissues, probably because damage accumulates.”⁸⁹ Thus, there is some modicum of general agreement upon the

⁸⁴ Olshansky, *Quest*, 51.

⁸⁵ Kirkwood, *Time*, 72.

⁸⁶ Kirkwood, *Time*, 116.

⁸⁷ Kirkwood, *Time*, 198-199. Olshansky also disputes the existence of specific genes that initiate any type of death sequence after the reproductive years have passed, *Quest*, 69, 76.

⁸⁸ Kirkwood, *Time*, 92.

⁸⁹ Kirkwood, *Time*, 97.

basic mechanisms associated with aging, but a wide variance in the theories which attempt to assign some level of causality to the various mechanisms.⁹⁰

Tissue Specific, Mathematical, and Unity Theories

The final three categories receive considerably less attention from Medvedev.

Tissue-specific theories of aging focus on the very different patterns of aging noted in various organs, and is the most practical of the categories of aging, “because in practice doctors do not deal with ageing as a general phenomenon which makes individuals mortal, but with specific age-related pathologies.”⁹¹ They too fit into the overall process of aging, and have their own contribution to make. The mathematical models are useful when considering molecular, genetic, and other theories of aging, notes Medvedev, but they fail to explain aging in all its complexity.⁹² Finally, unified theories of aging attempt to account for the various mechanisms and process associated with aging. The challenge for unity theories is accommodating and accounting for the constantly changing research findings and the more recently understood processes associated with aging. While not completely against the idea of unity theories, Medvedev asserts that “the diversity of different theories of ageing which consider *different* processes of ageing might be quite normal and fruitful.”⁹³ He contends that unity theories must concentrate on finding areas of overlap between competing theories.

Having surveyed various theories of human aging, it is clear that aging research is still in its nascent stages. Future discoveries may lead to a greater proliferation of aging theories, or it may help scientists move towards a more unified theory.

⁹⁰ A case in point involves the aforementioned discovery of a gene associated with Werner’s Syndrome. Both Kirkwood and Clark incorporate the discovery of this gene into their own theories of aging. Thus, where Clark sees this as evidence that aging is potentially caused by a few genes (e.g. genetic programmed theory of aging), Kirkwood sees the discovery of this gene as confirming the accumulative damage theory of aging, “the tantalising link between the ageing of cells and the accumulation of faulty molecules,” *Time*, 99.

⁹¹ Medvedev, “Rational Classification,” 389.

⁹² Medvedev, “Rational Classification,” 390.

⁹³ Medvedev, “Rational Classification,” 391. See for instance A. Kowlad, “Interactions of Different Aging: Development of a Unifying Model,” (Ph.D. diss., CNAA, National Institute for Medical Research, 1992) where he attempts to integrate the free radical, error catastrophe, and the defective organelle theory along with the reactions of proteolytic enzymes into a single theory of aging.

Whichever may prove true, most agree that aging and senescence is a complex process with several influencing factors at several different functional and biological levels. This fact has allowed theorists to incorporate new scientific findings into their own aging theories, and may move us no closer to success against aging.

Alternatively, the proliferation of aging theories and the complexity of the human body offers several different pathways along which life extension might be pursued. I turn now to recent laboratory successes in lifespan extension, studies which offer more hope that aging may one day be under our control.

Life-extension in the Laboratory

The subtle shift in attitudes towards the malleability of the aging process has certainly been driven by recent success in the laboratory, specifically in reference to two multicellular organisms, the nematode worm *Caenorhabditis elegans* (hereafter *C. elegans*), and the *Drosophila melanogaster* (hereafter *D. melanogaster*) or fruit fly. I look first at the *C. elegans*, and the various life-extending techniques carried out in the laboratory through genetic manipulation.

Genetic Manipulation

The *C. elegans* has proved an ideal organism for many experiments, given its limited cellular make up and short life span. The *C. elegans* contains exactly 959 cells and lives an average of 13 days. Of interest are the 131 cells which, though completely absent in the fully developed adult, multiply before entering apoptosis (programmed cellular death) over a 6-8 hour period during the organism's development.

Researchers are regularly uncovering different genetic pathways and mechanisms which influence aging in the *C. elegans*.⁹⁴ For example, two such genes which appear to control the 'death program' in the cells of *C. elegans* have been identified as *ced-3* and *ced-4*.⁹⁵ If, for instance, either of these genes is mutant, these 131 cells do not die, but continue developing into superfluous cells for which the organism has

⁹⁴ See for instance, Coleen T. Murphy, et al., "Genes that act downstream of DAF-16 to influence the lifespan of *Caenorhabditis elegans*," *Nature* 424 (2003): 277-283. It is believed that there are at least five genomic regions with several genetic pathways which influence the longevity of *C. elegans*. See Jazwinski, "Longevity," 54-59.

⁹⁵ Clark, *Means*, 70.

no use. Another gene dubbed ced-9 was discovered to oppose the cellular death sequence action of the ced-3 and ced-4 genes in cells. What is striking is that a human homologue of the ced-9 gene, entitled bcl-2, has been transferred into the *C. elegans* lacking this gene, successfully blocking the actions of ced-3 and ced-4 genes.⁹⁶ Other experiments have shown a doubling in lifespan of the *C. elegans* by genetic manipulation.⁹⁷ Yet another gene, labeled age-1, has also doubled the life span of *C. elegans*.⁹⁸ Banks and Fossel note that just two gene mutations created a six-fold increase in the lifespan of the *C. elegans*.⁹⁹ They go on to note that to a first approximation, this genetic manipulation appears to control free radical metabolism.¹⁰⁰ While the human organism is significantly more complex than the *C. elegans*, these studies show that aging in multicellular organisms can be modified by single gene mutations.

Telomerase Therapy

Another prospect for longevity comes from the discovery of an enzyme called telomerase. Until Leonard Hayflick and Paul Moorhead discovered in 1961 that somatic cells replicate a finite number of times,¹⁰¹ it was thought that somatic cells could replicate indefinitely in vitro under the correct conditions. But Hayflick and Moorhead proved that somatic cells undergo a *finite* number of replications. Their discovery has lead to two terms employed in the fields of molecular biology with regularity—replicative senescence, or the “Hayflick Limit.”¹⁰² Subsequent research

⁹⁶ Clark, *Means*, 71. Also see Tim A. Bloss, Eric S. Witze, and Joel H. Rothman, “Suppression of CED-3-Independent Apoptosis Through Mitochondrial β NAC in *Caenorhabditis elegans*,” *Nature* 424 (2003): 1066-1071.

⁹⁷ Clark, *Means*, 71. For more technical details see C. Kenyon, et al., “A *C. elegans* Mutant That Lives Twice As Long As Wild Type,” *Nature* 399 (1993): 362-366; Lakowski and Hekimi, “Determination of Lifespan,” 1010-1013; Ewbank, et al., “Structural and Functional Conservation,” 980-983; Larson, Albert, and Riddle, “Genes That Regulate,” 1567-1583; Guarente and Kenyon, “Genetic Pathways,” 255-262.

⁹⁸ D. B. Friedman and T. E. Johnson, “A Mutation In the *age-1* Gene in *Caenorhabditis elegans* Lengthens Life and Reduces Hermaphrodite Fertility,” *Genetics* 118 (1988): 75-86; T. E. Johnson, “Increased Life-Span of *age-1* Mutant in *Caenorhabditis elegans* and Lower Gompertz Rate of Aging,” *Science* 249 (1990): 908-912.

⁹⁹ Banks and Fossel, “Telomeres,” 1345.

¹⁰⁰ Banks and Fossel, “Telomeres,” 1345

¹⁰¹ L. Hayflick and P. Moorhead, “The Serial Cultivation of Human Diploid Strains,” *Experimental Cell Research* 25 (1961): 558-561.

¹⁰² For his description of the events which lead to the publishing of this seminal article, see Leonard Hayflick, *How and Why*, 116-136.

into the mechanisms involved in cellular senescence has attributed this finite number of divisions to the shortening of telomers, which are essentially the unencoded tips of the open chromosome in a DNA strand composing the double helix. Continued cellular division gradually shortens these tips to the point where DNA duplication cannot occur, and the cell enters a state where it is no longer capable of replication, replicative senescence.¹⁰³ Cell biologist William Clark notes that with repeated cell divisions, telomere shortening can lead to “chromosomal clumping,” where the ends of the chromosomes stick together, triggering the cell’s damage control system to halt the replication process.¹⁰⁴ While telomere damage is distinct from aging, it is related to human aging. Clark observes, “like the rest of the DNA in the nucleus, telomeres are susceptible to damage, and the ability to repair this damage has been shown to decline with age.”¹⁰⁵

Of equal interest is the fact that telomere shortening has *not* been observed among germ cells, or so-called immortal cells. This is credited to the presence of an enzyme, *telomerase*, which restores the telomeres. This enzyme is also present in other cells that divide throughout the majority of a cell’s life, like hair follicle cells, certain gut, and white blood cells.¹⁰⁶ Most somatic cells however—the cells of which are bodies are composed—undergo telomere shortening and eventually cease replication. But a study carried out in 1998, confirms the function of telomerase in human cells, where normal somatic cells were transfected with a gene that activates telomerase appeared to have escaped replicative senescence.¹⁰⁷ These transfected cells “had elongated telomeres, divided vigorously, . . . and exceeded their normal life-span by at least 20

¹⁰³ See Clark, *Means*, 109-113; Kirkwood, *Time*, 156-158; Austad, *Why We Age*, 67-68. Hayflick, *How and Why*, 135-136.

¹⁰⁴ This “chromosomal clumping” can also lead to cancer, is related to cellular aging. As cells continue to replicate over their life cycle, the control mechanisms that ensure correct replication become impaired themselves, allowing for unsafe division and potentially dangerous mutated DNA. See Clark, *Means*, ch. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Clark, *Means*, 111.

¹⁰⁶ Clark, *Means*, 110.

¹⁰⁷ Andrea G. Bodnar, et. al., “Extension of Life-Span by Introduction of Telomerase into Normal Human Cells,” *Science* 279 (1998): 349-352. See also Yang et al., “Human Endothelial Cell Life Extension By Telomerase Expression,” *Journal of Biological Chemistry* 374, no. 37 (1999): 26141-26148; Hahn, et al., “Inhibition of Telomerase Limits The Growth of Human Cancer Cells,” *Nature Medicine* 5, no. 10 (1999): 1164-1170.

doublings.”¹⁰⁸ The cells modified with telomerase surpassed the Hayflick limit. Some have made rather startling claims concerning the promise of telomerase therapy. Michael Fossel for instance, boldly claims that telomerase therapy will be widely available for life extension by 2015.¹⁰⁹ Most are not so optimistic. Nevertheless, the Geron Corporation has patented the human gene for telomerase.¹¹⁰

There have been recent setbacks as well, specifically concerning the p53 protein, which detects damaged DNA and initiates cellular apoptosis—the cell’s death sequence. For it appears now that attenuating this enzyme, while thought to slow down cellular aging, may actually leave cells more vulnerable to cancer.¹¹¹ Moreover, scientists at the Baylor College of Medicine¹¹² in Houston found that mice whose p53 gene had become hyperactive, while developing far fewer tumors, aged prematurely, raising the possibility that “the same p53 mechanism that protects us from cancer early in life may turn around later and accelerate aging.”¹¹³ These findings, while preliminary, would appear to support Williams’ theory of antagonistic pleiotropy. The big question however—how cellular replicative senescence relates to the aging of the organism—is still not clear.¹¹⁴ Steven Austad correctly contends that this distinction is crucial, “because virtually all research gerontologists now agree that what has been called cellular aging is not actually aging itself.”¹¹⁵ William Clark observes, “. . . understanding just how replicative senescence relates to aging in the entire organism will likely engage researchers for many years to come.”¹¹⁶ He does not believe that telomerase is the answer, because

¹⁰⁸ Bodnar, et al., “Extension,” 349.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Fossel, *Reversing Human Aging* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1996), 222.

¹¹⁰ Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, 60.

¹¹¹ Gerardo Ferbeyre and Scott W. Lowe, “The Price of Tumor Suppression?” *Nature* 415 (2002): 26-27.

¹¹² Stuart D. Tyner, et al., “p53 mutant mice that display early aging-associated phenotypes,” *Nature* 415 (2002): 45-53.

¹¹³ Ferbeyre and Lowe, 27.

¹¹⁴ Also see Kirkwood, *Time*, 89, who believes that replicative cellular senescence is not the same as organismal aging, though it is related to aging of the organism.

¹¹⁵ *Why We Age*, 225 n. 37.

¹¹⁶ Clark, *Means*, 113.

“most cells in the body do not divide most of the time.”¹¹⁷ That is, many of our somatic cells will reach replicative senescence long before they die. Even more troubling however, is the presence of telomerase in over 90% of all cancers, which allows the cancer cells to replicate without limit.¹¹⁸ Others also doubt that this finding is of any real significance to forestalling the aging process.¹¹⁹

Caloric Restriction

The most tested and effective method for life extension is caloric restriction, where the emphasis is on *undernutrition*, as opposed to *malnutrition*. The link between longevity and dietary restriction was first discovered by Clive McCay in 1930.¹²⁰ Since then, various studies have been carried out on numerous laboratory animals with promising results.¹²¹ Animals which were fed 30-50% less than animals fed *ad libitum* experienced an average lifespan increase of approximately one-third, with small variations between different species.¹²² Moreover, the calorically restricted rats and mice maintained energy, immune system function, and memory for a longer period of time.¹²³ Clark observes that fifty years of research has “demonstrated

¹¹⁷ Clark, *Means*, 112.

¹¹⁸ Clark, *Means*, 128-129.

¹¹⁹ Olshansky, Hayflick, and Carnes, “No Truth,” 80. “A single genetic intervention in an organism as complex as a human being would have little chance of combating the probably vast array of genes and biological activities that play a subtle, unpredictable parts in the timing of our ultimate demise.” See also Hayflick, *How and Why*, 6.

¹²⁰ For a brief history of the discovery linking caloric restriction and longevity, see Thomas C. Cesario and Daniel Hollander, “Life Span Extension by Means Other Than Control of Disease,” in *Life Span Extension*, 43-54.

¹²¹ See for instance Sang-Kyu Park, and Tomas A. Prolla, “Lessons learned from gene expression profile studies of aging and caloric restriction,” *Ageing Research Review* 4 (2005): 55-65; H.Y. Cohen, et al., “Calorie restriction promotes mammalian cell survival by inducing the SIRT1 deacetylase,” *Science* 305 (2004): 390-392; F. Picard et al., “Sirt1 promotes fat mobilization in white adipocytes by repressing PPAR- γ ,” *Nature* 429 (2004): 771-776; L. P. Guarente, “Forestalling the great beyond with the help of Sir2,” *The Scientist* 18, (2004): 34, <http://www.the-scientist.com/2004/4/26/34/1>; Carol C. Spaulding, Roy L. Walford, and Rita B. Effros, “The accumulation of non-replicative, non-functional senescent T cells with age is avoided in calorically restricted mice by an enhancement of T cell apoptosis,” *Mechanisms of Aging and Development* 93 (1997): 25-33; E. Masoro, “Dietary Restriction,” *Experimental Gerontology* 30 (1995): 291-298; N. L. Bodkin, H. K. Ortmeyer, and B. C. Hansen, “Long Term Dietary Restriction in Older-Aged Rhesus Monkeys: Effects on Insulin Resistance,” *Journal of Gerontology Biological Science* 50A (1995): B142-B147; M. A. Lane, et al., “Calorie Restriction Lowers Body Temperature in Rhesus Monkeys, Consistent With a Postulated Anti-Ageing Mechanism in Rodents,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, USA* 93 (1996): 4159-4164.

¹²² Kirkwood, *Time*, 176.

¹²³ Austad, *Why We Age*, 184.

conclusively that even moderate caloric restriction has a profound inhibitory effect on the development of tumors.”¹²⁴ Clark believes that the most likely biological explanation for the aging in fully fed animals is due to increased oxidative stress.¹²⁵ Moreover, he believes that the DNA repair of damage caused by oxidative stress is more efficient in the calorically restricted animals.¹²⁶ Austad suggests that caloric restriction may reduce a process called “browning” (also known as The Maillard Reaction)—where glucose attaches to proteins in unwanted places resulting in undesired, and unalterable chemical structures. Thus, “to the extent that browning is a central process of aging, the antiaging impact of caloric restriction might be partially explained by a reduced browning rate.”¹²⁷ Suresh I. S. Rattan summarizes the beneficial effects of caloric restriction:

These include increased efficiency of DNA repair, increased fidelity of genetic information transfer, more efficient protein synthesis and degradation, more effective cell replacement and regeneration, improved cellular responsiveness, fortification of the immune system, and enhanced protection from free-radical- and oxidation-induced damage.¹²⁸

Dr. Leonard Guarente and colleagues at MIT claim to have discovered the genetic pathway that effectively mimics the longevity effects produced by caloric restriction in yeast.¹²⁹ Yeast given an extra copy of the gene SIR2—silent information regulator No. 2—lived longer. Similarly, disruption of the SIR2 gene resulted in shorter than

¹²⁴ Clark, *Means*, 137-138.

¹²⁵ Clark, *Means*, 139.

¹²⁶ Clark, *Means*, 161. On page 201 however, he does concede that, despite the promising results of caloric restriction, it “may well be that excess caloric intake shortens maximal lifespan, not that caloric restriction extends it.” Leonard Hayflick asserted something similar to this, arguing feeding animals *ad libitum*, does not realistically mimic nature, and therefore actually *shortens* the lifespan of these animals, more than lengthening the life span of the calorically restricted mice, *How and Why*, 284. Kirkwood, aware of this objection, cites studies which show gains in longevity even when calorically restricted animals’ life spans are compared to those on a controlled diet, *Time*, 177. See also Austad, *Why We Age*, 189.

¹²⁷ Austad, *Why We Age*, 137.

¹²⁸ Rattan, “Gene Therapy,” 28.

¹²⁹ Nicholas Wade, “A Pill to Extend Life? Don’t Dismiss the Notion Too Quickly,” *New York Times*, 22 September, 2000, sec. 2A, commenting on Su-Ju Lin, Pierre-Antoine Defossez, and Leonard Guarente, “Requirement of NAD and SIR2 for Life-Span Extension by Calorie Restriction in *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*,” *Science* 289 (2000): 2126-2128. See also M. Kaeblerlein, M. McVey, and L. Guarente, “The SIR2/3/4 Complex and SIR2 Alone Promote Longevity in *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* by Two Different Mechanisms,” *Genes Development* 13 (1999): 2570-2580.

normal life spans. Gene silencing in general protects cell integrity and prevents the activation of other genes which might produce deleterious effects. Geneticist Tomas A. Prolla, at the University of Wisconsin believes that if this discovery can be translated to animals, it would offer “a starting point in the design of drugs which would have a broad effect on human health, including cancer.”¹³⁰ Moreover, says Prolla, there may be no need to restrict the longevity increase to 30-40%. One researcher, Dr. Roy Walford at the University of California, is not waiting around to see how research turns out with animals, and is preparing experiments on himself.¹³¹ Continued success in uncovering the mechanisms which mimic longevity by caloric restriction will continue to draw significant research and interest within the scientific community as they represent one of the more immediate pathways to longevity.

Additional Pathways to Longevity

Other means of extending life involve the use of enhanced SOD (superoxide dismutase) enzymes, which have shown success in extending the lives of the *D. melanogaster* by minimizing accumulative cell damage, though there is doubt over whether such a technique would produce similar effects in humans.¹³² Other demonstrable success has occurred through selective breeding. Michael Rose has shown how artificial selection of the *D. melanogaster* has substantially lengthened its life.¹³³ Rose artificially selects those genes which favor longer survival by only allowing the eggs produced near the end of the *D. melanogaster*'s reproductive period to hatch and develop to the next generation.¹³⁴ Rose has produced fruit flies with

¹³⁰ Wade, “A Pill?,” 2A.

¹³¹ Kirkwood, *Time*, 181; Clark, *Means*, 146. See also R. Weindruch and R. Walford, *The Retardation of Aging and Disease by Dietary Restriction* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1988).

¹³² W. Orr and R. Sohal, “Extension of Life-Span by Overexpression of Superoxide Dismutase and Catalase in *Drosophila melanogaster*,” *Science* 263 (1994): 1128-1130; J. Tolmasoff, T. Ono, and R. Cutler, “Superoxide Dismutase: Correlation with Lifespan and Specific Metabolic Rate in Primate Species,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 77 (1980): 2777-2781. SOD therapy has also been nearly as successful in *C. elegans*, S. Melov, et al., “Extension of life-span with superoxide dismutase/catalase mimetics,” *Science* 289 (2000): 1567-1569. See also Yoko Honda and Shuji Honda, “Oxidative Stress and Life Span Determination in the Nematode *Caenorhabditis elegans*,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 959 (2002): 466-474.

¹³³ For more detail, see M. R. Rose, *Evolutionary Biology of Aging* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); “Aging as a Target for Genetic Engineering,” in *Engineering the Human Germline*, ed. Gregory Stock and John Campbell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 49-56.

¹³⁴ Michael R. Rose, “Laboratory evolution of postponed senescence in *Drosophila melanogaster*,” *Evolution* 38 (1984): 1004-1010. See also L. S. Luckinbill, et al. “Selection for Delayed Senescence in *Drosophila melanogaster*,” *Evolution* 38 (1984): 996-1003.

three times the initial lifespan.¹³⁵ Other research avenues involve radio protectors which minimize the damaging effects of normal environmental radiation on the body.¹³⁶ One such radio protector, WR-2721, has been shown to lengthen the period of time in a cell cycle devoted to repair of genetic damage.¹³⁷ While it is important to highlight that to date, no such technology has been tried on humans, and that not all gerontologists and researchers agree on the simplicity or feasibility of life extension, the fact that the life span of other multicellular organisms have been extended by the manipulation of a single gene is significant. These examples of laboratory success are only some of the methods currently under investigation. Other possibilities for greatly extended lives involve cryonics, hormone replacement, nanotechnology, and organ growth and transplantation.

Scientific Attitudes towards Prolongevity

A furious search has begun for the mechanisms that control aging. While there is plenty of discussion and disagreement concerning the pathways to longevity, most believe that greatly lengthened life spans will one day be reality. Given that many of the processes relating to aging are now under constant scientific surveillance, and acknowledging that this research presupposes, to some extent, that control over human aging is desirable, an examination of the general scientific attitudes towards manipulating the aging process is in order.

It is clear that many researchers studying aging are not likely to be content with simply *understanding* the processes that affect aging without turning to manipulation and control. As the mechanisms of aging are continually discovered, they become targets for manipulation. Steven N. Austad concludes, “now that some processes central to aging have been identified, research can finally begin on actually altering the aging rate itself by tinkering with these processes.”¹³⁸ While acknowledging that there are philosophical, social, and ethical issues surrounding the retardation of aging, Austad appears resigned to a technological determinism.

¹³⁵ Clark, *Means*, 53.

¹³⁶ Olshansky, *Quest*, 138-139.

¹³⁷ Olshansky, *Quest*, 140.

¹³⁸ Austad, *Why We Age*, 140.

It does seem compellingly apparent, though, that regardless of the social desirability of slowing aging, if science uncovers therapies that can do it, those therapies will be employed. This is one genie that has no chance of being put back in the bottle.¹³⁹

Similarly, for Tom Kirkwood the question of *whether* we should try to slow aging appears to have already been answered. Kirkwood's primary concerns are methodological—"whether we will use germ-line or somatic gene therapy, and what gene delivery system we might use."¹⁴⁰ Several scientists, having recently coined the acronym SENS—Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence—are equally unperturbed by any potential social upheavals that may result from significant gains in life extension, failing to consider the wisdom in pursuing a retardation of the human aging process.¹⁴¹

We therefore urge abandonment of the despondency that currently prevails with regard to engineering negligible senescence. We acutely recognize the social upheavals that such progress may well bring about, and join with others in stressing the need to prepare for them as best we can. However, apprehension of that transformation must not divert us from pursuing a goal that, after millennia of frustration, may now be within sight.¹⁴²

The exhortation to "prepare for them as best we can" appears to have foreclosed any discussion concerning prudence, even as it is acknowledging that extending healthy life is cause for apprehension. Indeed, there is the underlying assumption that science can treat or mitigate any ancillary problems created by the development of such a technology.

Even a cursory glance at the potential problems of life extension reveals that they would be substantial. "Life extension will wreak havoc with most existing age-graded hierarchies," says Francis Fukuyama, with people likely having to work into their eighties and nineties to support social security and other pension plans.¹⁴³ This is not to mention the possibility of a greatly extended period of fertility for child-

¹³⁹ Austad, *Why We Age*, 181.

¹⁴⁰ Kirkwood, *Time*, 228.

¹⁴¹ Aubrey, D. N. J. de Grey, et al., "Time to Talk SENS: Critiquing the Immutability of Human Aging," *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 959 (2002): 453.

¹⁴² de Grey, "Time to Talk SENS," 460.

¹⁴³ Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, 64-65.

bearing and the real possibility of four and five generations co-existing together, let alone issues of anti-aging therapy affordability and availability. Others are concerned about the potential deleterious effects on the environment. Yet, these consequences appear ‘manageable’ when spoken of abstractly, especially when compared to the complexities facing the geneticist in the laboratory. Research marches on.

Daniel Perry, director of The Alliance for Aging Research says, “the drive to discover the means to produce youthful health and vitality is no less than a matter of national necessity.”¹⁴⁴ Though opposed to research on and attempts to slow aging, Daniel Callahan agrees with Perry’s assessment, although he sees “national necessity” as another way of saying “research imperative.”¹⁴⁵ Olshansky and Carnes speak of the coming biomedical technologies to extend human life as inevitable.¹⁴⁶ Even those with reservations on the wisdom of slowing aging acknowledge that the technological imperative to manipulate and control nature will not be deterred. Zhores Medvedev for instance, wonders whether indeed slowing the rate of aging amounts to a Promethean revolt against the natural order, especially given other more pressing societal needs. Yet even he concedes that “in the history of science, the pursuit of what is immediately useful has not been the main motive behind progress,” and that “efforts in this direction [to understand and retard aging] will continue with growing determination.”¹⁴⁷ Those opposed to aging research have been dubbed “radical mortalists,” guilty of trying to “protect their cramped and limited vision of human nature.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Daniel Perry, “Rise of the Gero-Techs,” 57.

¹⁴⁵ Daniel Callahan, “Is Research a Moral Obligation? Plagues, Death and Aging,” The President’s Council on Bioethics, July 2003, http://bioethicsprint.bioethics.gov/background/callahan_paper.html. Also available as Chapter 3 in Daniel Callahan, *What Price Better Health? Hazards of the Research Imperative* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future*, 67, says that “the medical profession is dedicated to the proposition that anything that can defeat disease and prolong life is unequivocally a good thing.”

¹⁴⁶ Olshansky, *Quest*, 185.

¹⁴⁷ Medvedev, “Structural Basis,” 16.

¹⁴⁸ Ronald Bailey, “Forever Young: The New Scientific Search For Immortality,” *Reason Magazine*, August 2002, <http://reason.com/0208/fe.rb.forever.shtml>.

One additional question that defies a definitive answer concerns the length of extended life, presupposing that life extension prolongs healthy life and punctuates the period decline. How long is long enough? It is somewhat instructive that gerontologist Tom Kirkwood, while pointing out the distinction between lengthening life by treating disease and lengthening life by treating aging, asks why we should not extend life.

But in terms of ageing, we are all, metaphorically speaking, in sinking ships. So if we question the wisdom of extending life by fighting ageing, but not by rescuing holiday-makers from drowning, we need to agree just when and why extra life is not worth having. And most important, we need to agree who is to decide. As a gerontologist, I am sometimes asked how long I would personally like to live. My answer is this: I want to live as long as my quality of life is good and I can look forward to each new day.¹⁴⁹

Kirkwood's sentiments might very well resonate with the masses desiring a greatly extended life. Yet it is perhaps not too large a leap from Kirkwood to Thomas Nagel's musings, who chooses living another week over dying in five minutes, extrapolating this sentiment to eternity.¹⁵⁰ Others have likened attempts to push out the boundaries of the human life span as a denial of death itself. Marguerite Shuster's recent comments on aging research are insightful:

Far from treating death as inevitable, parts of the research and medical establishments (not to mention the diet, exercise, and cosmetic surgery establishments) proceed almost as if increasing understanding of the process of aging and progress in the treatment of disease could postpone death indefinitely. It is as if the process of decay we can plainly observe is something we *should* surely be able to learn to control: the very idea that we could not is a kind of affront.¹⁵¹

Such a stance towards aging and death is also supported in our wider therapeutic culture that "has frequently perpetuated the self-deception that death can be avoided if we work hard enough and sufficiently trust our rational scientific abilities."¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Kirkwood, *Time*, 21.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 224.

¹⁵¹ Shuster, *Fall and Sin*, 236-237.

¹⁵² Keith Meador and Shuan Henson, "Growing Old in a Therapeutic Culture," in *Growing Old in Christ*, 90.

While it could be argued that life extension itself is a manifestation of the very remembrance of our mortality, it is more likely that this project stems from a fear of death. One cannot help but wonder “if there is not lurking under this business of curing aging some notion of avoiding death altogether.”¹⁵³ Whether or not one hopes for an indefinite deferral of death is another question. While The President’s Council On Bioethics has asserted that the implicit desire in life extension is earthly immortality,¹⁵⁴ it is perhaps more accurate to see life extension as an attempt to *domesticate* death, as most of those involved in aging research acknowledge only marginal gains in longevity, while denying the possibility of earthly immortality. Given the more realistic scenario of modest gains in longevity, it could be argued that a modest lifespan increase would hardly be detrimental to the acquisition of wisdom stemming from life’s brevity.

There are of course those who espouse moderate positions concerning the use of aging retardation as a means of working within one’s natural lifespan by compressing the period of morbidity, as difficult as this may prove to be. Whether current biological limits are breached or not however, the ability to manipulate aging in order to add healthy years to life represents the latest attempt to address the discrepancy between the limited body and one’s limitless desires. Discoveries of the mechanisms and processes associated with aging have fostered a new optimism in bringing aging under control in hopes of engineering greatly extended healthy life spans, even though aging is a complex process explained by numerous conflicting, though not entirely exclusive, theories of aging.

Discoveries of the mechanisms and processes associated with aging have fostered a new optimism in bringing aging under control in hopes of engineering greatly extended healthy life spans, though aging is a complex process explained by numerous conflicting, though not entirely exclusive, theories of aging. The advances made against aging thus far in fruit flies and nematode worms indicate the potential

¹⁵³ Timothy F. Murphy, “A Cure for Aging?” 249.

¹⁵⁴ “Age-Retardation: Scientific Possibilities and Moral Challenges,” December 2002, http://www.bioethics.gov/background/age_retardation.html. “The underlying impulse driving age-retardation research is, at least implicitly, a desire for immortality.”

for extended human lives, though the reality of this vision and the timing are still issues under dispute. Before constructing a Christian response to aging attenuation however, it will be necessary to first consider the trends which have lead to the current situation, lest the response misses the underlying assumptions driving this project. While the desire for longer life or even immortality are likely as old as humanity itself, it will be worth considering the origins of the search for aging attenuators in the history of modern medicine, including the assumptions surrounding this search. Thus, in the next chapter I attempt to trace how aging has become increasingly construed as a problem requiring instrumental control.

Chapter 2: The Baconian Project and the Development of Aging as a Medical Problem

“It is an ancient saying and complaint, that life is short and art long; wherefore, it behoveth us, who make it our chiefest aim to perfect arts, to take upon us the consideration of prolonging man’s life, God, the author of all truth and life, prospering our endeavours.”¹

Francis Bacon

“Instead of finding means to conserve life I have found another, an easier and surer one, which is not to fear death.”²

Descartes

Having looked at contemporary research to uncover the complex processes of human aging, including the attitudes endemic to this research, it is important to pause at this point in an attempt to conduct—however provisional and tendentious—a cultural analysis by asking how aging has come to be perceived as a problem to be solved by medicine, or alternatively, ‘Whence the instrumental stance toward aging?’³ This question is important because it has been rightly observed that a social or cultural analysis is “an indispensable requirement of an adequate Christian ethic,” lest ethical discussions are uncritically conducted under the assumption that the reigning moral standards and assumptions are “universal rather than parochial.”⁴ This critique certainly applies to the assumptions regarding the nature of aging and embodiment

¹ *History, Natural and Experimental, of Life and Death, or of the Prolongation of Life*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: M. Murphy, 1876), 468.

² “Descartes to Chanut, 15 June 1646,” in *Philosophical Letters*, ed. and trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 196.

³ Carole Bailey Stoneking has argued that even theologians who have recently looked at aging have failed in this regard, as if aging were merely a matter of “social policy: unemployment, poverty, disease, health care, retirement, and pensions,” and rightly asserts that “Christian theology should have something more to offer.” See “Modernity: The Social Construction of Aging,” in *Growing Old in Christ*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 73.

⁴ Birch and Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, 78. This is closely related to H. Richard Niebuhr’s call to answer the question “What’s going on?” before considering “What should I do?” *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1963).

inherent in the search for longer life. If such analysis is ignored, any forthcoming moral guidelines or judgments may lack credibility, be unacceptably reactive or too far removed from where people live. Moreover, there is the risk of unwittingly underwriting practices and underlying assumptions that ought to be challenged.

It must be immediately admitted that the question as to how and why aging has become a problem to be mitigated by technology would require an enormously complex answer, and that any attempt to trace the influences within a single chapter runs the risk of truncation and over-simplification. Perhaps the most general statement regarding aging has been made by historian David. H. Fischer, that “at the same time that old age came to be more common, it also came to be regarded with increasing contempt,” a sentiment which finds widespread agreement, though many disputes remain concerning the contributing factors.⁵ Even in identifying particular trends associated with particular individuals, it must be further noted that I am in no way attempting to establish particular chains of causality—though they no doubt exist—given again the enormous difficulties involved in establishing such links. Though it will become immediately apparent, for instance, that the push for longevity in modernity was for a time intimately linked with religious and theological commitments, determining the degree to which such commitments have either contributed to, or detracted from the push to view aging as a problem requiring a scientific solution is not easy to determine. Nevertheless, it will be possible to make some general assertions in tracing shifting attitudes regarding aging.

In doing so, I will begin with Gerald P. McKenny’s construal the aims of modern medicine, appropriately dubbed the ‘Baconian Project,’ in part because Francis Bacon put forward a renewed emphasis for the treatment of human aging in calling for a different scientific methodology, justifying this call theologically. I couple Bacon’s writings with added insights from Charles Taylor, who examines the relationship between Bacon’s program and Calvinistic strands of the Reformation and beyond. It will also be useful however to consider the interplay of cultural, religious, and scientific currents during the birth of the disciplines which would later

⁵ *Growing Old in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 114.

become known as geriatrics and gerontology in America. Here I will be relying on cultural historian Thomas R. Cole, who, in his examination of the relationship between cultural and religious thought, identifies a noticeable shift in attitudes toward aging amongst New England Protestants during the late eighteenth century, shifts which mirrored changes in the wake of the Reformation in Europe.

McKenny traces the origins of contemporary medical practice to Francis Bacon (1561-1626), describing such practice as the ‘Baconian Project,’ defined by the twin goals of the elimination of suffering and the expansion of choice.⁶ Bacon’s work is particularly relevant to the inquiry concerning shifts in attitudes toward aging for several reasons, not the least of which is the central aim of his program: the prolongation of human life.⁷ But Bacon’s agenda included not only the treatment of disease, but the forestalling of aging itself. Unlike previous searches for longevity however, consisting largely of primitive ‘fountain’ legends, alchemy, and hygienic methods, Bacon called for relentless inductive research into the mechanisms of the human aging process, aware of its highly-complex, intransigent nature.⁸ Moreover, Bacon’s stress on the *use* to which this knowledge should be put had a theological basis which has been described as more than just a “casual exploitation[s] of the familiar religious vernacular.”⁹ First, it will be useful to look at Bacon’s methodology, whose instrumental stance toward nature entailed the removal of teleological concerns from scientific inquiry.

⁶ Gerald P. McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition: Bioethics, Technology, and the Body* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 2.

⁷ Graham Rees, “Introduction,” *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, vol. 6, *Philosophical Studies*, ed. Graham Rees and Lisa Jardine, trans. Graham Rees and Michael Edwards (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), lxxv. “Bacon wanted to leave no stone unturned in the search for the means to prolong life,” lxxviii.

⁸ Gerald J. Gruman has chronicled the vast history of prolongevity from various legends and *Taoism* to hygienic methods to alchemy in its Chinese, Hellenistic, and Latin variants, which he describes as primitive at worst and *proto* science at best in that it was believed that longevity had been achieved in the past. “History of Ideas,” 74-75.

⁹ John Channing Briggs, “Bacon’s Science and Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bacon*, ed. Markku Peltonen (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 176.

Instrumental Knowledge and the Loss of Teleology

Throughout Bacon's writings he stresses the need for this natural knowledge to be *useful*. He expresses his dissatisfaction with older methods of inquiry into the operation of the natural order, and argues that inquiry into such knowledge ought to be instrumental; it ought to be *put to use*. In putting forward his theological justification for pursuit of instrumental knowledge, he relentlessly criticizes the nature of scientific investigation handed down from the Greeks—most notably Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus—for their pursuit of understanding to the near exclusion of the *use* to which such knowledge might be put.¹⁰ Medicine too has moved “rather in a circle than in progression.”¹¹ Bacon laments that “scarcely one single experiment can be culled that has a tendency to elevate or assist mankind.”¹² They have erred, claims Bacon, in seeking knowledge for itself, and “not for benefit and ostentation or any practical enablements in the course of life.”¹³ In particular, Bacon claims that prior efforts to uncover natural knowledge were hindered by wrongly incorporating teleological concerns into the investigation of nature itself: “Inquiry into final causes is barren, and like a virgin consecrated to God produces nothing.”¹⁴ Specifically, Bacon asserts that “the handling of final causes, mixed with the rest in physical inquiries, hath intercepted the severe and diligent inquiry of all real and physical causes, . . . to the great arrest and prejudice of further discovery.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Bacon prefers the more ancient Greeks like Empedocles, Democritus, and Heraclitus in that they “betook themselves to investigation of truth with greater silence, and with more severity and simplicity,” *Novum Organum* I.71, in *The Works of Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia, PA: M. Murphy, 1876), 354.

¹¹ *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. II, in *Works*, vol. 1, 203. In particular, he laments the abandonment of the ‘diligence of Hippocrates’ in recording diseases, treatments, and the outcome of treatments on patients. See Madeline M. Muntersbjorn, “Francis Bacon’s Philosophy of Science: *Machina intellectus* and *Forma indita*,” *Philosophy of Science* 70 (December 2003): 1138.

¹² *Novum Organum* I.73, in *Works*, vol. 3, 354. Bacon criticizes them for being excessively empirical like ants who “heap up their store” or dogmatical like spiders who “spin out their own webs.” Bacon prefers the bee which extracts matter from flowers and puts it to use, *Novum Organum* I.95, in *Works*, vol. 3, 362.

¹³ Valerius Terminus, quoted in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 213.

¹⁴ Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, quoted in T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 70 n. 2.

¹⁵ *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. II, in *Works*, vol. 1, 198. Bacon is not opposed to the investigation of final causes, so long as such an inquiry is restricted to the realm of metaphysics. Moreover, variable or respective causes can be pursued in physics, while “fixed and constant causes” are considered in metaphysics, *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. II, in *Works*, vol. 1, 196.

Bacon's theological justification for the discovery of useful knowledge is nicely encapsulated in his criticisms of the ancient Greeks, where he asserts that they have "sought in knowledge a couch, whereupon to rest a searching and restless spirit," rather than "a rich storehouse, for the glory of the Creator, and the relief of man's estate."¹⁶ In *Valerius Terminus* Bacon declares that knowledge must "be subject to that use for which God hath granted it, which is the benefit and relief of the state and society of man."¹⁷ The advancement of knowledge is to be used both to relieve suffering and to glorify God. The ordinary ambitions of men ought to be directed toward "the amplification of the power and kingdom of mankind over the world."¹⁸ Elsewhere Bacon calls for an inductive methodology, beginning with questions in order that "we may yield up their fortune to mankind . . . from which must necessarily follow an improvement in their estate, and an increase of their power over nature."¹⁹ Power and utility are to be the new ends of knowledge. If properly and humbly pursued, such knowledge "leadeth to the greater exaltation of the glory of God," otherwise, it carries the serpent's sting, and "maketh the mind of man to swell; as the Scripture sayeth excellently, 'Knowledge bloweth up, but charity buildeth up.'"²⁰

Bacon is however careful to draw a distinction between *moral* knowledge—the knowledge 'of good and evil' which occasioned the fall—from *natural* knowledge wherewith Adam both worked the garden and named the animals, a knowledge further expanded through the investigations of Moses, Solomon,²¹ and even Job.²²

¹⁶ *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. I, in *Works*, vol. 1, 174.

¹⁷ *Valerius Terminus*, in *Works*, vol. 1, 83. For instance, Bacon was critical of physicians who remained with terminal patients as a matter of 'a scruple and religion,' rather than using such situations to garner the skill "for the facilitating and assuaging of the pains and agonies of death," *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. II, in *Works*, vol. 1, 204.

¹⁸ *Valerius Terminus*, in *Works*, vol. 1, 84.

¹⁹ *Novum Organum* Bk. II.52, in *Works*, vol. 3, 425.

²⁰ *Valerius Terminus*, in *Works*, vol. 1, 83. Elsewhere Bacon declared that '*scientia inflat*,' *Advancement of Learning* Bk. I, in *Works*, vol. 1, 162.

²¹ Bacon speaks of an imaginary Academy of Science, "Solomon's House," wherein several medicines to retard aging were developed, including a "Water of Paradise," Gruman, "History of Ideas," 81.

²² *Valerius Terminus*, in *Works*, vol. 1, 82; *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. I, in *Works*, vol. 1, 162.

Though man through the fall has lost both his state of innocence and his ‘empire over creation,’ *both* can be partially recovered in this life by religion on one hand and by the arts and sciences on the other, given especially that creation has not become ‘entirely rebellious’ by the curse, but is capable of ‘supplying man’s daily wants,’ as evidenced by God’s decree in Genesis 3:19—“In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread.”²³ Bacon’s ideas here have been termed ‘the new asceticism,’ where the “new men of the God-given science will wear sweat upon their brows rather than hair shirts upon their backs.”²⁴ Bacon himself believed that his was the era to witness the fulfillment of Daniel 12:4 where knowledge (*scientia*) shall be increased.²⁵ While Bacon largely believed that increased knowledge should relieve the state of humankind, one of the main uses to which he believed the advancement of knowledge should be put was the retardation of aging, a goal often described in biblical terms as a return the garden of Eden.

Longevity and the Return to Eden

Bacon describes advances in practical knowledge as the way by which we might approach our prelapsarian state the garden of Eden. Such knowledge is not to be used for raising one’s spirits, wits, satisfaction, ambition, pride, honor, or fame, but for “a restitution and reinvesting, in great part, of man to the sovereignty and power . . . which he had in his first state of creation.”²⁶ The return to paradise was thus to come from an expansion of natural knowledge, ranging from “a discovery of all operations and possibilities of operations from immortality, if it were possible, to the meanest mechanical practice.”²⁷ Indeed, central to Bacon’s program as a whole was the prolongation of life. Once again, his program was thoroughly suffused with his understanding of God and the scriptures. For Bacon “the Bible . . . appears no less

²³ *Novum Organum* Bk. II.52, in *Works*, vol. 3, 425; “Only let mankind regain their rights over nature, assigned to them by the gift of God, and obtain that power, whose exercise will be governed by right reason and true religion,” *Novum Organum* Bk. I.129, in *Works*, vol. 3, 371.

²⁴ Tovey, “New Understanding,” 574.

²⁵ *Valerius Terminus*, in *Works*, vol. 1, 83.

²⁶ *Valerius Terminus*, in *Works*, vol. 1, 83.

²⁷ *Valerius Terminus*, in *Works*, vol. 1, 83.

explicit in its description of the method to be followed for combating the loss of Paradise than it is in its description of this loss itself.”²⁸

While Bacon believed that a new method of scientific inquiry and medicine would lead to longer life, he also called for an expansion of medicine beyond the mere cure of disease to include inquiry into the human aging process in hopes that it might be retarded, distinguishing death by disease from death by aging, or the “total decay of the body.”²⁹ In his *History of Life and Death* (1622-1623), subtitled *The Prolongation of Life*, Bacon records his hope that physicians will learn to consider themselves as instruments of Divine by uncovering the mechanisms of human aging.

I have one hope, and wish, that it may conduce to a common good; and that the nobler sort of physicians will advance their thoughts, and not employ their times wholly in the sordidness of cures, neither be honoured for necessity only, but that they will be come coadjutors and instruments of the Divine omnipotence and clemency in prolonging and renewing the life of man.³⁰

Though Bacon hoped that increased longevity through the attenuation of aging might come from an increase in knowledge, he also recognized that any success would come from God as a token of His favor, situating this quest within the Christian narrative which looks forward to the ‘land of promise:’

For, though we Christians do continually aspire and pant after the land of promise, yet it will be a token of God’s favour towards us in our journeyings through this world’s wilderness, to have our shoes and garments (I mean those of our frail bodies) little worn or impaired.³¹

²⁸ George V. Tovey, “Toward a New Understanding of Francis Bacon’s Reform of Philosophy,” *The Philosophical Review* 61 (October 1952): 573.

²⁹ *History, Natural and Experimental, of Life and Death, or of the Prolongation of Life*, in *Works*, vol. 3, 468.

³⁰ *History of Life and Death*, in *Works*, vol. 3, 467. One also sees hints of what is now commonly known as the compression of the period of morbidity. Though elsewhere Bacon claimed that he personally did not want “one minute added to the incertain date of my years,” he expressed concern that he might not “be so long in dying as I was in being born,” *An Essay on Death* 4, 10, in *Works*, vol. 1, 132, 133 respectively.

³¹ *History of Life and Death*, in *Works*, vol. 3, 467.

He asserts that the Christian should not ‘esteem long life too lightly’ under the weight of heaven—even though this life is marred by sin—because it provides the believer more opportunities to pursue works of charity.

For long Life being an increasing heape of sinnes and sorrowes lightly esteemed of Christians aspiring to Heaven, should not be despised, because it affoorded longer opportunity of doing good Workes.”³²

Thus, Bacon did not consider longevity of importance because life affords only limited opportunities, but argued instead that a longer life meant the possibility of accumulating more works of charity.

Bacon also believed that the promise of long life spoken of in the Old Testament was becoming an increasing reality ‘after our Saviour’s days,’ citing the beloved disciple who outlived his companions and the longevity of ‘holy monks and hermits’ as evidence.³³ Though he candidly concludes his brief apology with a striking confession—“but to esteem of this [long life] as the chiefest good, we are but too prone”—he immediately notes that the real difficulty lies in ‘how to attain the same’ given that theories of human aging are corrupted with ‘false opinions’ and ‘vain reports.’³⁴ Thus, the difficulties of this life and the promise of a better life to come presented no theological impediments to the development of an inductive science whereby useless opinions and reports might be overcome with useful knowledge into the mysteries of aging and its retardation.

While Bacon’s *History of Life and Death* contributed little by way of knowledge into human aging, his call for the inquiry into the retardation of aging supported by the notion of stewardship of God’s creation brought considerable prestige to the idea of prolonging life through the inductive study of God’s book of nature. It has been noted that the general program espoused by gerontologists today contains priorities

³² *The Historie of Life and Death: With Observations Naturall and Experimentall for the Prolonging of Life* (London: Humphrey Mosley, 1638), 1-2.

³³ *History of Life and Death*, in *Works*, vol. 3, 468.

³⁴ *History of Life and Death*, in *Works*, vol. 3, 468. Bacon was hardly optimistic concerning the ability of contemporary medicine to do much good to the body: “it is a vain and flattering opinion to think any medicine can be so sovereign or so happy, as that the receipt or use of it can work any great effect upon the body of a man,” *Advancement of Learning*, Bk. II, in *Works*, vol. 1, 205.

that can be traced back to Bacon.³⁵ Charles Taylor also identifies a connection between certain strands of the Reformation and modern science, most notably in “the religious outlook which suffuses Bacon’s works,”³⁶ an outlook reflecting Bacon’s Puritan background which essentially “provided a hospitable environment for the scientific revolution.”³⁷

Taylor has asserted that Baconian science “gains a pious purpose within the framework of Puritan spirituality.”³⁸ In particular, Bacon’s emphasis on putting natural knowledge to use for God’s glory harmonized nicely with the Calvinistic strands of the Reformation which eschewed the church, among other things, as the mediator of salvation, relocating it in God’s inscrutable decree issued before the foundations of the earth (Ephesians 1), infusing the everyday or ‘ordinary life’ with the weight of heaven as the ‘proving ground’ for demonstrating (not earning) one’s election.³⁹ To avoid however the sinfulness of idolatry—desiring the things of earth as ends in themselves rather than as a means to an end—the Puritans stressed the *use* of nature for the end of glorifying God, lest they succumb to idolatry by becoming *absorbed* in the things of creation.⁴⁰ Hence, “they do God’s work in labouring to complete and preserve the things of creation, and first of all themselves.”⁴¹ Thus, notes Taylor, instrumentalizing things became an essential spiritual step where establishing rational control over ourselves and nature became the means by which the Christian could both avoid the sin of idolatry and bring glory to God by relieving man’s estate.

Over time however, Taylor notes that the Victorian era brought several cultural transformations together which gradually allowed the Baconian project to slip from

³⁵ Gruman, “History of Ideas,” 82. See W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Crossing Frontiers: Gerontology Emerges as a Science* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7.

³⁶ *Sources of the Self*, 231.

³⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 230.

³⁸ *Sources of the Self*, 232.

³⁹ *Sources of the Self*, 215-217. Max Weber defined this mindset as “innerworldly asceticism.”

⁴⁰ *Sources of the Self*, 221-223. See Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 1-16.

⁴¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 231.

its theological moorings, namely the Enlightenment and Romanticism.⁴² On the one hand, the ideals of the radical Enlightenment⁴³ placed increasing weight on rational thought at the expense of revelation, making deism appear as more acceptable alternative to a God whose providential activity could be discerned to some degree through His interactions with creation.⁴⁴ A particular example is nominalist theology's eschewal of any reified forms of laws that might be discernable from nature itself, a move largely designed to protect the absolute freedom (or *potentia absoluta*) of God.⁴⁵ However, an ontology which asserts that only particulars exist tends to invite experimentation on new generic orderings of nature.⁴⁶ Moreover, an increasingly mechanistic conception of the workings of the universe as put forward by Isaac Newton (1642-1727) further diminished the need for God's providential ordering of nature and any teleological approach to it. Taylor also asserts that other radical thinkers of the Enlightenment like Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) were able to make the relief of suffering a universal goal situated in a hedonic calculus with considerable moral force—"the love of humankind"—free from any reference to or reliance upon revelation.⁴⁷ Taylor notes that the relief of suffering became "a new standard for all remaining conceptions of religious, moral, and legal order: Do they lessen the amount of suffering in the world or contribute to it?"⁴⁸

Romanticism also contributed to the current situation in what Taylor calls 'inwardness,' understood as an inner conviction of one's own significance and

⁴² *Sources of the Self*, 393-396. Taylor also notes that other factors like the industrial revolution and modern naturalism.

⁴³ *Sources of the Self*, 321-354. To be sure, René Descartes (1596-1650) deserves mention as well, for Descartes believed that increasing knowledge over nature would allow for greatly extended lives. Especially significant is his assertion that the mortal body (*res extensa*) and the immortal soul (*res cogitans*) are effectively independent. See *Discourse on Method and Related Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 6, 54. Descartes' ideas will be considered later in the thesis.

⁴⁴ Deism can take several forms. Taylor sees a subtle shift in Locke's combination of rationality and revelation which resists the typical Augustinian-Thomistic pattern, 234-247.

⁴⁵ Margaret J. Osler, "Theological Issues in Gassendi's View of Science," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44 (October-December 1983): 552.

⁴⁶ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 49.

⁴⁷ *Sources of the Self*, 331, quoting Ross Harrison, *Bentham* (London: Routledge, 1983), 276.

⁴⁸ *Sources of the Self*, 331.

fulfillment. If an emphasis on individual autonomy stressed ‘pursuing one’s own unique path,’ expressivism emphasized one’s originality.⁴⁹ The autonomous individual is free to look inward to discern one’s desires and then fashion nature to fit one’s desires. As briefly mentioned above, Taylor argues that our modern identity has been handed down from the Victorian era which brought Enlightenment and Romanticist thought together, an identity informed by a notion of moral progress, individual autonomy, the relief of suffering, and the belief that the current generation has surpassed the former in knowledge and understanding.⁵⁰ As McKenny notes, “the commitment to eliminate all suffering combined with an imperative to realize one’s uniqueness leads to cultural expectations that medicine should eliminate whatever anyone might consider to be a burden of finitude or to provide whatever anyone might require for one’s natural fulfillment.”⁵¹ Strands of these are certainly visible in the rhetoric surrounding the development of anti-aging technology.

The impact of Bacon’s program is difficult to overestimate. As McKenny observes, with Bacon’s program which jettisoned teleological concerns in the investigation of the physical universe, “the concepts of nature as ordered by a telos or governed by providence are replaced by concepts of nature as a neutral instrument that is brought into the realm of human ends by technology.”⁵² Oliver O’Donovan has noted that such abstraction from teleology “creates a dangerous misunderstanding of the place of man in the universe.”⁵³ McKenny observes that modern discourse on medicine is the natural outflow of Bacon’s program where “moral convictions about the place of illness and health in a morally worthy life are replaced by moral convictions about the relief of suffering and the expansion of choice”⁵⁴ While Bacon’s program has lead to the relief of much suffering, it would be wrong to blame medicine’s inability to discern limits to the loss of teleology alone, much less to the abandonment of Bacon’s theological moorings. Here McKenny is as right in his recognition of the

⁴⁹ *Sources of the Self*, 375.

⁵⁰ *Sources of the Self*, 393-396.

⁵¹ *To Relieve the Human Condition*, 20.

⁵² McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition*, 21.

⁵³ O’Donovan, *Resurrection*, 52.

⁵⁴ McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition*, 21.

good that has come from Bacon's program as he is in rejecting any notion that a return to any supposed 'golden age' of medicine is the way forward.⁵⁵ It is however worth asking whether Bacon's call for the instrumental use of nature to relieve man's estate by curing disease and attenuating aging was sufficiently informed by the Christian narrative where God's activity in the world is discerned more clearly in the person of Jesus Christ.

While Bacon situated his call for the inductive investigation of nature within the Christian narrative which recognizes the future resurrection body secured by Christ's, it appears that the body itself has been reduced to an object of study and manipulation—even when manipulated for the Glory of God. How our very corporeality and the limits such corporeality entails might serve our spiritual development is severely, if not entirely, muted with Bacon. Moreover, though Bacon believed that inductive knowledge of nature should be applied to attenuate the aging process in a 'return to Paradise,' it appears that he never seriously questioned the kind of people we might become along the way, speaking instead of prelapsarian man strictly in terms of 'sovereignty' and 'power.'⁵⁶ Such a limited construal of prelapsarian existence effectively rules out the possibility of bodily suffering and limitedness as serving to refine the soul.⁵⁷ McKenny expresses similar concerns in noting that

the Baconian project not only replaces attitudes and practices regarding the moral significance of the body, its pursuit of health, and its susceptibility to disease, decay and death, . . . but is itself a set of attitudes and practices regarding the body, and one that is pervasive in our self-formation.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition*, 21.

⁵⁶ *Valerius Terminus*, in *Works*, vol. 1, 83; *Novum Organum* Bk. II.52, in *Works*, vol. 3, 425. Indeed, while Bacon avers that "all knowledge is to be limited by religion," he also immediately insists that such knowledge must "be referred to use and action," *Valerius Terminus*, in *Works*, vol. 1, 81. McKenny notes that "the medical wisdom of learning the limits of healing and accepting the mortality of the body will yield to Bacon's admonition to call no disease incurable and, even more presciently, to orient medical knowledge to the prolongation of life," *To Relieve the Human Condition*, 19.

⁵⁷ McKenny too has noted that with Bacon's program "the body as object of spiritual and moral practices is replaced by the body as objects of practices of technological control," *To Relieve the Human Condition*, 21.

⁵⁸ McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition*, 219.

A body so construed tends to view the body as the property of the ‘person’ and hence the instrument of one’s desires.⁵⁹ It would seem then that the terms ‘sovereignty’ and ‘power’ are in need of some incarnational qualification in light of Jesus Christ, who demonstrated sovereignty in servitude and power in weakness.⁶⁰ Later I will argue that Athanasius and St. Antony had such an incarnational understanding regarding the moral force of embodiment, even as they too spoke of a similar return to paradise which entailed, among other things, an attenuation of aging.

Aging in Early America

Having traced several developments from Bacon’s call to the instrumentalization of knowledge to extend life by slowing the aging process, it will be useful to take a closer look at one particular example of the ways in which aging came to be viewed as a problem requiring a technological solution. In the remainder of this chapter I will look at the shifts in aging in America by considering the work of cultural historian Thomas R. Cole. There have been several good studies concerning the attitudes regarding aging and the aged in America, most of which detect a noticeable shift in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries away from the general veneration of old age (or at least a considerable degree of respect) toward the veneration of youth,⁶¹ though the reasons given for this shift range from cultural, social, legal, to religious.⁶² I have singled out Cole in part for his particular emphasis on the religious

⁵⁹ McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition*, 198.

⁶⁰ The moral significance of embodiment has been championed by Stanley Hauerwas, who has put forward relentless criticism of the modern biomedical ethicists who routinely consider the body as neutral with regards to ends and means. See for instance *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977); *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues: Theological Conversations With Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

⁶¹ Jesse F. Ballenger notes that “historians of old age generally agree that, though there has never been a ‘golden era’ in American history in which the elderly were unequivocally revered, the second half of the nineteenth century saw an intensification of anxiety about the aging process and hostility toward the aged,” *Self, Senility, and Alzheimer’s Disease in Modern America: A History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 13.

⁶² See for instance David H. Fischer, *Growing Old in America*; W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience Since 1790* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Ballenger, *Self, Senility, and Alzheimer’s*, esp. ch. 3; Andrew Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), ch. 2; Richard B. Calhoun, *In Search of the New Old: Redefining Old Age in America, 1945-1970* (New York: Elsevier, 1978);

dimensions of this shift, most specifically amongst the Americans of New England, whose largely Puritan attitude towards aging and death gave way to a Victorian morality mentioned above. Moreover, I think that Cole's recognition of the loss of the moral component of aging and his proposed solution to restore 'existential integrity' to the human aging process are well-founded, though I will suggest that such an 'existential integrity' requires a Christian metanarrative to sustain the tensions inherent in such an integrity.

In his investigation of the cultural history of aging in America, Cole traces the theological, cultural, and scientific shifts among Americans in New England from the ideals of aging among the Puritans to contemporary attitudes. Cole asserts that the current attitudes towards aging and death are dominated by the medical establishment, marked by fear, evasion, and hostility. He traces these contemporary attitudes to Romantic evangelicals, various health reformers, physicians and the authors of advice books on aging, all of whom facilitated an abandonment of a 'late Calvinist' ideal of aging which entailed an 'existential integrity' that allowed for reflection on the meaning of aging and death. The collapse of this 'existential integrity' has "bequeath[ed] science a legacy of fear, evasion, and hostility toward aging."⁶³ While the 'late Calvinist' view of death may have sustained the tension of physical decay and the hope of heaven, revivalist theology's stress on a voluntarist conception of salvation early in life, coupled with an uncritical appropriation of a Victorian morality which entailed a belief in scientific progress, proved a suitable spiritual counterpart to a health reform movement that placed unbearable pressure on one's autonomous behavior in accordance with God's natural laws. This led to what Cole has termed a dualistic vision of aging and death, where a long, healthy life followed by a good death or a 'natural death' was attained by obedience to God's laws, while a bad, early, disease-ridden and drawn out death became associated with

Howard P. Chudacoff, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); William Graebner, *A History of Retirement: The Meaning and Functioning of an American Institution, 1885-1978* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980); Carole Haber, *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Carole Haber and Brian Gratton, *Old Age and the Search for Security: An American Social History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

⁶³ Cole, *Journey*, xxv.

sin and disobedience, effectively segregating spiritual growth from aging. With increasing scientific advances, a declining belief in the afterlife, and the failure of hygienic practices to deliver on its promises, emphasis shifted towards the negative pole of aging and death, whether perceived as natural or pathological. Therefore, today aging is largely viewed as a problem for scientists and medical researchers, having supplanted questions concerning the meaning humans construct in making sense of aging and death. Cole identifies three ideals of aging throughout these cultural shifts, to which I now turn.

The Late Calvinist Ideal of Aging: ‘Death Without Order’

Cole sees the last vestiges of ‘existential integrity’ regarding aging among the ‘late Calvinists,’ whose understanding of aging and death reflect the Puritan emphasis on the value of what Charles Taylor termed ‘ordinary life,’ which nevertheless still recognized aging as an uncertain journey to eternal life.⁶⁴ While the shortness of life took on added significance for the Puritans who valued every day as an opportunity to demonstrate one’s eternal election, they shared much in common with the understanding of death and aging common to the Middle Ages where the *Ars moriendi*, the deathbed practices of penance, prayer, and the renouncement of vices—including the excessive desire to remain on earth—were considered crucial given the imminence of divine judgment.⁶⁵ While it has been generally observed that the Puritans “faced death with an intensity virtually unknown in modern American

⁶⁴ Cole, *Journey*, 16. See also Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1930), 157-158.

⁶⁵ Jacques Choron observes that in the Middle Ages “the moment of death became of the utmost importance, since the deathbed came to be seen as the battleground of the last and desperate fight which the Devil and his cohorts waged for the soul of man. Because of this contest between the forces of Good and Evil in the last hour it was indispensable to avail oneself of the help the Church was ready to extend; . . .” *Death and Western Thought*, 92; Lonnie D. Kliever, “Death in Biblical Thought,” in *Encyclopaedia of Bioethics*, Revised Edition, ed. Warren Thomas Reich, vol. 1 (New York: Simon & Schuster MacMillan, 1995): 511. See also Brian Copenhauer, “*Ars Moriendi*,” *ibid.*: 549-551.

life,”⁶⁶ they also shared a sentiment expressed by John Donne (1572-1631), that “our critical day is not the very day of our death but the whole course of our life.”⁶⁷

Cole notes however that by the early nineteenth century the stress created by the doctrine of God’s inscrutable will with respect to election and eternal security were waning under the revivalist preaching of George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. He locates the last remnants of a Calvinist view of death and aging in the preaching Puritan divine Nathaniel Emmons (d. 1840) where “death remained the last bastion of Calvinism’s absolute, incomprehensible, and sovereign God.”⁶⁸ Emmons preached a ‘death without order,’ urging a preparation for death. “God discovers no order in calling men out of the world. As he gave them life, so he takes it away at his pleasure. . . .”⁶⁹ Cole observes that Emmons had little regard for the health and strength of the young, considering any age as one where death may strike, preferring instead the sovereignty of a merciful God who inscrutably determines the number of one’s days.

The oldest person on earth cannot give a reason why he did not die in infancy, or in childhood, or in any period or circumstance of life in which others have died. The living are a wonder to themselves. They can assign no reason why they have not, before now, been numbered with the dead. They are the monuments of God’s sparing, distinguishing and sovereign mercy.⁷⁰

Because God could ‘take one away’ at any time, expectation of a long life was unwise. While one could pray for lengthened lives “as long as they fulfill the design of providence”⁷¹ Emmons nevertheless considered the hope for a long life the

⁶⁶ David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), ix.

⁶⁷ Cole, *Journey*, 23, quoting “Death’s Duell or, a Consolation to the Soule, Against the Dying Life, and Living Death of the Body,” in *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, ed. Charles M. Coffin (New York: Random House, 1952), 58ff.

⁶⁸ Cole, *Journey*, 61.

⁶⁹ Cole, *Journey*, 61, quoting Nathaniel Emmons, “Death Without Order,” in *The Works of Nathaniel Emmons*, vol. 3 (Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1842), 36-37.

⁷⁰ Cole, *Journey*, 61-62, quoting Emmons, “Death Without Order,” 38.

⁷¹ Cole, *Journey*, 62. Cole does note that Emmons acknowledges that one’s choices in life can greatly extend one’s life.

“strongest and most fatal practical error” in that it leads to the neglect of spiritual concerns.⁷²

Emmons’ nominalist tendencies are also on display in his declaration that God routinely counteracts the laws of nature with regards to longevity. Indeed, Emmons asserts that God effectively cuts short everyone’s life, allowing perhaps one in every million to “reach the bounds of life which nature has set.”⁷³ Hence, piety was the only proper response for those fortunate enough to have reached old age, and the only compensation to the accompanying physical and mental losses.⁷⁴ Emmons also notes that age in itself was worthy of respect; even those who did not demonstrate piety deserved to be treated with “respect and tenderness.”⁷⁵ Cole finds in Emmons an existential integrity which acknowledges both the limitedness of bodily life and our seemingly limitless desires:

Emmons refused to rationalize or evade the most basic and irreconcilable conflict of the human condition—the contradiction between one’s self and one’s body, between one’s limitless desires, dreams, ambitions, and one’s fragile, decaying, physical existence.⁷⁶

Later evangelicals were less willing to accept these contradictions leading eventually to a dualistic vision of aging.

Revivalism and Health Reform, and the Dualistic Vision of Aging

Cole asserts that a new “dualistic vision” of aging developed from both the theological shifts occurring during the great Awakenings and the advances of the health reformers, where a negative ideal of aging marked by decline, dependency, and decrepitude, became associated with sinful patterns of life, while a positive ideal of aging, marked by autonomy and health right up to the very day of one’s death,⁷⁷

⁷² Cole, *Journey*, 63, quoting Emmons, “Shortening of Life,” *Works*, vol. 3, 87-88.

⁷³ Cole, *Journey*, 62, quoting Emmons, “Shortening of Life,” *Works*, vol. 3, 82.

⁷⁴ Emmons, “Piety,” *Works*, 2: 501-502.

⁷⁵ Cole, *Journey*, 65.

⁷⁶ Cole, *Journey*, 63.

⁷⁷ Cole, *Journey*, 106.

was promulgated by the health reformers as an attainable goal through virtue, self-reliance, and proper living.⁷⁸

Cole identifies the seeds of this shift in revivalist theology of the Great Awakenings, where longevity came to be seen as the reward for proper behavior. This is exemplified in the preaching of revivalist Charles Finney (1792-1875), who believed that death was susceptible to a degree of human instrumentality.

Who does not know that the time of man's death . . . is a matter of entire contingency; that his days may be lengthened or shortened by his own conduct; that years, or scores of years, may be added to or subtracted from, his life, through the instrumentality of his own agency.⁷⁹

Finney's theology also significantly compressed the earlier Puritan morphology of conversion to Christ, adding a strong voluntarist element. Where the Puritans considered conversion as something one gradually learns over time by demonstrating one's election through daily activities, Finney stressed personal conversion as necessary to *begin* one's spiritual journey, a choice one is more likely to make earlier in life.⁸⁰ David Stannard has also located a similar shift, citing Charles Chauncy (1705-1787), who was sharply critical of conversion through stages, averring instead that salvation "might well be with the individual from birth."⁸¹ Cole observes, "just as salvation had become a matter of personal volition, length of life and quality of old age came to hinge on self-discipline."⁸² This shift also paved the way for a 'natural death,' or, dying of old age, which "complemented the evangelical certainty of supernatural salvation."⁸³ This new emphasis however carried implications for both the young and old alike.

⁷⁸ *Journey*, 91. These two poles of aging are crucial for Cole's analysis. He summarizes the history of aging from this point forward as oscillations between these positive and negative poles, 162, 237.

⁷⁹ Cole, *Journey*, 83, quoting Charles Finney, "Reprobation," in *Sermons on Important Subjects* (New York: J. S. Taylor, 1836), 242.

⁸⁰ Finney also denied any notion of predestination, divine election, or original sin, taking a strong voluntarist position with respect to sin and salvation. See Glenn A. Hewitt, *Regeneration and Morality: A Study of Charles Finney, Charles Hodge, John W. Nevin, and Horace Bushnell* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1991), ch. 2; David L. Weddle, *The Law as Gospel: Revival and Reform in the Theology of Charles G. Finney* (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1985).

⁸¹ *Puritan Way*, 153.

⁸² Cole, *Journey*, 83.

⁸³ Cole, *Journey*, 106.

If this revivalist theology implicitly favored youth in adopting an increasingly instrumental stance toward aging, it also had unfavorable implications for the aged. Presbyterian minister Albert Barnes (1798-1870) for instance, expressed little hope that the aged could be converted: “the chills and frosts of age are about as unfavorable to conversion to God as the frosts and snows of December are to the cultivation of the earth.”⁸⁴ At the same time, opponents of Finney’s reforms continued to stress the Augustinian linkage of aging and death with sin. One of the outcomes of this revival, observes Cole, is an increased correlation between old age and death.⁸⁵ Hence, a sinful lifestyle could easily lead to a ‘bad’ old age, including the physical suffering of disease and general infirmity.⁸⁶

Over time, Cole asserts that later Romantic evangelicals unwittingly embraced a ‘civilized’ or Victorian morality inherent in Finney’s theology, emphasizing “personal responsibility and internalized restraint,” which dovetailed nicely with the health reformers’ image of healthy old age, effectively adopting “a hygienic utilitarianism that had little room for either the vicissitudes of old age or the glory of God.”⁸⁷ Various health reformers like William Alcott, Sylvester Graham believed that disease could be eliminated by employing a ‘Christian’ hygienic program, denying that old age must necessarily be accompanied by the wretchedness of physiological decline. Alcott asserted that a longer life could be attained by obeying the laws of God.

If Methuselah suffered from what we call the infirmities of age, it was his own fault. God, his Creator, never intended it. The very common belief, that old age necessarily brings with it bodily infirmities, besides being a great mistake, reflects dishonor on God.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Cole, *Journey*, 81, citing Albert Barnes, “The Harvest Past,” in *Practical Sermons: Designed for Vacant Congregations and Families* (Philadelphia: H. Perkins, 1841), 349-350.

⁸⁵ Cole, *Journey*, 90. David Stannard has also noted the influence of Romanticism on the Puritans by both conservatives and liberals, *Puritan Way*, 151-153.

⁸⁶ Cole, *Journey*, 94.

⁸⁷ Cole, *Journey*, 77-78, 91. Cole acknowledges Sigmund Freud, Nathan G. Hale Jr., and Norbert Elias for this definition. Cole never clearly defines ‘evangelicals,’ but associates them with the “Northern Protestant religious culture,” *Journey*, 78.

⁸⁸ Cole, *Journey*, 105, quoting William Alcott, *The Laws of Health* (Boston: J. P. Jewett, 1860), 9-10.

Conversely, the wretchedness of physiological decline “whenever is made so by sin.”⁸⁹ Sylvester Graham, who began his career as a Presbyterian minister, said “the true principles of health and longevity, and the true principles of virtue and religion are inseparable,” predicting antediluvian lifespans within a few generations.”⁹⁰ Alcott and Graham considered the physical and spiritual as inseparable; spiritual welfare entailed bodily welfare.⁹¹ In this period there is a moral equivalency between long life and morality. As such, there was naturally an accompanying host of remedies and strategies for promoting health and longevity, including vegetarianism, temperance, sexual restraint, phrenology, fresh air and exercise.

Cole asserts that later ‘Romantic evangelicals’⁹² reinforcement the bifurcated image of later life, where old age became one’s right, where the good man could expect an easy passage ‘from glory to glory,’⁹³ while “sinners would not live out half their days.”⁹⁴ Though the ‘late Calvinists’ were burdened by disease and suffering as something ineradicable, Romantic evangelicals’ added to that burden by essentially holding the infirm elderly responsible for their own ‘bad aging.’ Where earlier the doctrine of original sin guaranteed indiscriminate and indeed universal aging and decline ending in death, under the Victorian vision of ‘civilized morality’ the individual was held responsible for failing to attain the ideal old age; aging thus became a sign of personal moral failure.⁹⁵ As a result,

piety was transformed into the sum of civilized behavior; longevity into the dividend of properly invested physical capital; and death into a natural and peaceful transition from old age to eternal youth.⁹⁶

⁸⁹ Cole, *Journey*, 105, quoting Alcott, *Laws of Health*, 9-10.

⁹⁰ Cole, *Journey*, 97, 101, quoting Sylvester Graham, *Lectures on the Science of Human Life* (New York: S. R. Wells, 1858), 265. See also *A Lecture to Young Men on Chastity* (Boston: Light and Stearns, 1834).

⁹¹ Cole, *Journey*, 98, quoting Graham, *Lectures on the Science of Human Life* (New York: S. R. Wells, 1858), 264.

⁹² Cole understands Romantic evangelicals at this point as placing an emphasis on Christ’s love over against his commands, and the idea that God was sensitive to pain through Christ’s sufferings, *Journey*, 128. Key figures involve Henry Ward Beecher, Phillips Brooks, and Horace Bushnell.

⁹³ Cole, *Journey*, 135, quoting Beecher, “Treasures in Heaven,” in *Forty-Eight Sermons: Preached Previous to 1867*, 4th ed, vol. 1 (London: R. D. Dickinson, 1890), 8.

⁹⁴ Cole, *Journey*, 134, likely in reference to Psalm 55:23.

⁹⁵ Cole, *Journey*, 140.

⁹⁶ Cole, *Journey*, 139.

Despite the increasing sense that one's aging and death could be managed through proper spiritual discipline and care of the body, Cole observes that evangelicals' optimism was tempered in large part by the significance of immortality of the soul as "the most important element in advice to cultivate one's spiritual life."⁹⁷ Even amidst these shifts, Cole still observes the necessary 'tensions' which help us discern the meaning of aging, tensions between this life and the next, between desiring to mold the length of one's and entrusting oneself to one's creator in physical decline, and in the old Protestant notion of life as a journey towards God. The rapid progress of science however, was to undermine this image.

The Rise of Science and the Shift towards the Negative Pole of Aging

Both Cole and Stannard note that the increasing pace of scientific discoveries weakened the romantic vision of control over one's destiny.⁹⁸ The rise of science in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, observes Cole, facilitated a shift toward the negative pole of aging, where "scientific investigation now revealed old age as an inevitable casualty in the great 'race of life,'" where "medical expertise would provide the appropriate standards of care."⁹⁹ As enthusiasm increased for the scientific search for the means to extend life, the general attitude towards death and decline turned increasingly negative. Cole notes that

unlike earlier supporters of life extension, prolongevity advocates in this period [1890-1925] declared infirm old age (and in some cases, death) an unacceptable condition, and they proceeded with the struggle to abolish it.¹⁰⁰

Some writers of this period referred to old age as the *fixed period*, the title of Anthony Trollope's futuristic novel where citizens who reach sixty-seven years of age are 'deposited' in an honorary college called 'Necropolis' for a year where they are allowed to live in peace and comfort before being peacefully chloroformed and

⁹⁷ Cole, *Journey*, 155.

⁹⁸ Stannard, *Puritan Way*, 188.

⁹⁹ Cole, *Journey*, 164.

¹⁰⁰ Cole, *Journey*, 175.

cremated, departing under “circumstances of honor and glory” by avoiding the “imbecility and weakness of human life when protracted beyond its fitting limits.”¹⁰¹

Cole traces the beginning of this movement to physician George Miller Beard (1839-1883) who repudiated the popular sentimental notions of old age, as the first to “scientifically legitimate the reduction of human beings to their productive capacities.”¹⁰² Beard conducted a massive biographical study of the greatest names in history, determining that the median age for most discoveries and great work was approximately forty, after which productivity fell off rather sharply. He therefore concluded that it may actually be “a blessed thing to die young, or at least before extreme old age.”¹⁰³ In February 1905, William Osler (1849-1919), one of the most famous physicians in the United States, declared that men over the age of forty were comparatively useless and those over sixty completely useless, asserting that “nearly all the great mistakes,” whether political, social, artistic, literary, or theological in nature, “may be traced back to the sexagenarians.”¹⁰⁴ By the end of the nineteenth century, Cole asserts that “scientific assessments of efficiency and productivity had come to dominate public evaluation of old age.”¹⁰⁵

Two influential figures of this era sharing similar convictions were C. A. Stevens (1844-1931) and Elie Metchnikoff (1845-1916). Stevens’ lament in particular appears to capture the *zeitgeist* of the period: “we live too late to be buoyed and comforted by the illusions of religion, too soon to reach the goal and snatch our lives from the grasp of death.”¹⁰⁶ After begrudgingly abandoning the idea of an afterlife, Stevens declared that “immortal life will be achieved by the aid of applied science; it

¹⁰¹ Anthony Trollope, *The Fixed Period*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 132, 142.

¹⁰² Cole, *Journey*, 168. See also Ballenger, *Self, Senility, and Alzheimer’s*, 20 ff.

¹⁰³ Cole, *Journey*, 168, quoting Beard, “On the Decline of the Moral Faculties in Old Age,” lecture to the Long Island Historical Society, not published, no date, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Ballenger, *Self, Senility, and Alzheimer’s Disease*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Cole, *Journey*, 173.

¹⁰⁶ Cole, *Journey*, 176, quoting C. A. Stevens, *Natural Salvation* (Norway Lake, ME: The Laboratory at Norway Lake, Maine, 1903), 127.

is what the whole scheme of evolution moves forward to.”¹⁰⁷ Believing that proper nutrition could unlock cellular immortality, Stevens promulgated longevity through a proper diet, asserting that it would lead to an increased spiritual life by mitigating excessive desire for both food and sex “as the sense of deathlessness grows.”¹⁰⁸ Given this rather utopian view of longevity, it is hardly surprising that his enthusiasm for earthly immortality was matched with an equal disgust of the physical decline of aging, which he described as “grossness, coarseness, and ugliness.”¹⁰⁹

In France, immunologist Elie Metchnikoff, who first coined the term gerontology, was supremely confident in the ‘new faith’ of science. Metchnikoff’s new book entitled *The Nature of Man* (subtitled *Studies in Optimistic Philosophy*), was described as offering a ‘new faith:’

If it be true that man cannot live without faith, this volume, when the age of faith seemed gone by, has provided a new faith, that in the all-powerfulness of science.¹¹⁰

Metchnikoff did not simply believe in prolonging life alone, but in prolonging the period of vitality as well, a tenet still considered crucial among contemporary researchers on aging. Unlike Stevens however, Metchnikoff believed in the possibility of a ‘natural death,’ asserting that bacteriology was the key to longevity through the elimination of disease.¹¹¹ Though living in Europe, Metchnikoff’s ideas received wide circulation in America in 1905, when several writers summarized his agenda to counter the pessimism of the enormously popular William Osler. Writing for *McClure’s Magazine*, Arthur E. McFarlane, for instance, captured Metchnikoff’s social agenda well, where “longer life would have its highest value in restoring ‘the old man to his rightful position in the world.’”¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Cole, *Journey*, 176, quoting Stevens, *Natural Salvation*, 127.

¹⁰⁸ Cole, *Journey*, 177, quoting Stevens, *Natural Salvation*, 210.

¹⁰⁹ Cole, *Journey*, 177, quoting Stevens, *Natural Salvation*, 235-236.

¹¹⁰ Cole, *Journey*, 187, quoting Elie Metchnikoff, *The Nature of Man: Studies in Optimistic Philosophy* (London: Putnam, 1904), vii.

¹¹¹ Cole, *Journey*, 188.

¹¹² Cole, *Journey*, 190, quoting Arthur E. McFarlane, “Prolonging the Prime of Life,” *McClure’s* 25 (September 1905): 551.

Cole suggests that *fixed period* doctrine was becoming increasingly established, shaking the earlier expectations that one could control one's longevity by proper living, further establishing the negative pole of America's dualistic vision of aging and decline.¹¹³ He concludes that longevity's

attack on premature senility and physical degeneration enabled people to transfer diffuse anxieties onto a comfortable terrain. The quest for a longer, healthier life seemed to resolve troubling existential and ideological questions in the familiar terms of bodily economy.¹¹⁴

Gradually, this quest came increasingly under the domain of the scientific expertise and the inductive search for 'useful' knowledge, loosed from the strictures of teleology. As Cole observes, from the mid nineteenth-century onward, biomedical science placed increasing emphasis on *how* we age, over against *why* we age.

By the early twentieth century, aging had been largely freed from its religious and cosmological moorings, allowing scientists to focus nearly exclusively on the biological causes of aging, whether cellular or genetic.¹¹⁵ The development of the respective fields of gerontology and geriatrics, which examine the normal and pathological causes of aging respectively, reflect the Victorian dualistic vision of aging, however with the assumption that biology is 'value free.'¹¹⁶ The formative gerontological and geriatric literature of the period, "helped complete the long-term cultural shift from conceiving aging primarily as a mystery or an existential problem to viewing it primarily as a scientific and technical problem."¹¹⁷ Hence, modern culture is left with the overwhelming consensus that aging is more of a problem to be managed by gerontology and geriatrics than a transcending reality.¹¹⁸

While Cole writes professionally as a cultural historian, he rightly laments the loss of 'existential integrity' regarding aging, and calls for a new integrated version that

¹¹³ Cole, *Journey*, 174-175.

¹¹⁴ Cole, *Journey*, 179.

¹¹⁵ Cole, *Journey*, 193-194.

¹¹⁶ Cole, *Journey*, 194. 'Gerontology' was coined by Elie Metchnikoff in 1904, and 'geriatrics' by I. L. Nascher in 1909. See also Achenbaum, *Crossing Frontiers*.

¹¹⁷ Cole, *Journey*, 195.

¹¹⁸ Cole, *Journey*, 211.

accepts both decline and decay and hope for a long, healthy life, one which recognizes that “aging is a source of wisdom and suffering, spiritual growth and physical decline, honor and vulnerability.”¹¹⁹ Though Cole admires the late Calvinist ideal of aging—even if his construal of this ideal mutes the intense stress and anxiety that often accompanied old age and death among many New England Puritans¹²⁰—he nevertheless downplays the theology by which such a tension is maintained. Surely Cole is right to see a tension in the late Calvinist ideal, for Calvin urges Christians to *both* cherish this life *and* despise it, knowing that God may take it at any moment.¹²¹ Cole however prefers to speak of this late Calvinist tension as one between the limited body and one’s unlimited desires. Yet, for Calvin the very foundation of this tension is the resurrection of Christ, by which the Christian can look forward to her resurrection, establishing a clear tension between this world and the next, between this sin- and death-marred existence and the existence where there will be no more death (Revelation 21:4). Hence, while Cole sees the loss of this ‘late Calvinist’ ideal as contributing to the current situation, it is clear that he has no interest in recapturing any Puritan understanding of death as part of the solution, as evidenced by his hope to establish more meaningful postmodern narratives of aging.¹²²

If recapturing the ‘late Calvinist’ ideal of death is not the way forward, neither are the various programs of the health reformers, who, while maintaining some link between morality and mortality, placed an unbearable burden of personal responsibility on the individual for their own longevity. Cole concludes his work in calling for a more integrated version of aging in a postmodern life course stripped of

¹¹⁹ Cole, *Journey*, xxv. See also Carole Bailey Stoneking, “Modernity: The Social Construction of Aging,” in *Growing Old With Christ*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Carole Bailey Stoneking, Keith G. Meador, and David Cloutier (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003): 63-89.

¹²⁰ See Stannard, *Puritan Way*. Cole too easily accepts the notion that the Puritans willingly submitted to a ‘death without order’ with a peaceful acceptance of the frailty of the human life, giving inadequate attention to the extreme fear of death within Puritanism, generated primarily by the question of assurance of one’s election. Where Cole sees an existential integrity, Stannard sees a “stress-creating ambivalence,” 75.

¹²¹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Bk. III, ch. IX, para. 1-5, in *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 712-717; *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: SCM Press, 1954), 113.

¹²² Cole, *Journey*, 242 ff.

any theological residue by emphasizing life as a journey that seeks value in “the actual progress of discovery,” says Cole, “rather than in the traditional pattern of Christian teleology.”¹²³ Drawing upon Sophocles’ vision of aging and death in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, Cole asserts that we must persevere on our individual journeys of self discovery as we navigate the unknowns and mysteries of the sacred frontier of aging with love and compassion, accepting physical decline and mortality.¹²⁴ Cole is right to challenge the pervasive influence of the underlying biotechnological metanarrative and its attendant myopic, reductionist vision of aging as ‘problem’ requiring a technical solution, but one wonders if the tensions he rightly sees in aging can be adequately sustained by simply any journey of discovery. Though Cole seems to recognize that some metanarrative is required to make sense of aging and decline in drawing upon Sophocles, the Christian metanarrative should not be so easily jettisoned, even if the Baconian or health reformers’ version was in need of some repair.

Conclusion

The modern quest to retard the aging process can be traced back to Francis Bacon’s program, whose call for the relief of suffering entailed an inquiry into the causes and mechanisms of aging itself, freed from the strictures of teleological explanations in favor of the search for instrumental knowledge, a project theologically underwritten by the notion of bringing glory to God and the relief of humanity’s estate, described with the biblical imagery of a return to the garden of Eden. I asserted that Bacon’s terms of power and sovereignty used to describe humanity’s return to Paradise through the instrumentalization of aging are in need of Christological or incarnational qualification in light of the reality of Jesus Christ, given that Bacon’s vision of a return to Eden fails to adequately consider the type of people we might become in manufacturing such a return, particularly the role the human body is to play in this drama. A Christological qualification therefore will have to consider the moral significance of one’s body, and how any attenuation of the aging process might impact one’s character. Thus, a theological response to anti-aging science will need to account for the role of the body in character formation.

¹²³ Cole, *Journey*, 242.

¹²⁴ Cole, *Journey*, 243-244.

If Bacon's program demonstrates how easily a program calling for the scientific management and attenuation of human aging can be *underwritten* with theological convictions, Cole's work has traced how the gradual *loss* of theological convictions regarding aging and death have facilitated a move toward aging primarily as a problem requiring a medical solution. While Cole likely underestimates the amount of fear and anxiety that accompanied death *before* the development of geriatrics and gerontology, he rightly laments the loss of a narrative in which to situate aging, a narrative that accounts for both the physical and spiritual elements of aging, providing adequate space in which to see aging as both decline and growth. However, Cole too hastily jettisons the Christian metanarrative, which, if properly told, will provide the framework necessary to give an account of the moral force of embodiment, an account capable of sustaining the tensions he rightly identifies.

Before taking up a theological response to life extension via aging attenuation, it will be helpful to survey the ethical landscape with regards to the responses of the possibility of slowing the aging process thus far, for many of the ethical responses to life extension fail to account for the significance of the body, or, if they do, are not necessarily situated within the Christian narrative.

Chapter 3: Ethical Responses to Aging Attenuation

“The shortness of the present life is very far from being its most unsatisfying feature. And we are left in no doubt as to how much interest those who have hoped most for immortality would have retained in the prospect of it, had they been told it was to mean only an endless prolongation of the common life on earth. So far from being elated, they would have been crushed and terrified.”¹

John Baillie

“If it is a fearful thing to die, perhaps it will be still more dangerous to live longer.”²

Thomas à Kempis

In the last chapter I traced the origins of the modern attempt to attenuate human aging to Francis Bacon, claiming that his program, while situated in the Christian drama of creation and redemption, did not adequately consider the moral significance of embodiment and the body’s limits in construing the advance of instrumental knowledge as a return to Eden. Bacon’s emphasis on instrumental knowledge and the attenuation of aging considerably muted the role the body might play in character development. Additionally, I examined Thomas Cole’s analysis of the history of aging in America, where he laments the loss of existential tensions inherent in aging when construed primarily as a problem for our technological capabilities. I noted that Cole seems to recognize some moral force in the aging body in his call for new postmodern narratives of aging which account for the possibility of spiritual growth in a time of physiological decline. While these are very valid concerns, many of the ethical discussions concerning life extension either give little or no consideration to character development as it relates to embodiment. Moreover, those which do appeal to the body’s limits as being in some way normative generally do so in the absence of any grounding metanarrative,³ weakening such appeals. In this chapter then I

¹ John Baillie, *And the Life Everlasting* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 204-205.

² Thomas à Kempis, quoted in Timothy F. Murphy, “A Cure for Aging?,” 237.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, of course, has emphasized the importance of narrative for moral thinking. See *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990), esp. 118 ff.

show how consequentialist arguments concerning life extension fail to adequately address the role of the body and matters of character. Moreover, I examine several responses to life extension which rest upon some understanding of the body as normative, though struggle to do so in the absence of a compelling narrative. Finally, I examine the sparse theological responses offered up thus far, and show how they too fail to provide an adequate christological understanding of embodiment as it relates to aging attenuation.

Life Extension and Consequentialism

In order to gain a sense of the arguments both for and against life extension via aging attenuation, I will consider the recent debate between bioethicists Walter Glannon and John Harris. I will also briefly discuss the largely consequentialist arguments outlined in Christine Overall's monograph devoted to the subject.

The Walter Glannon and John Harris debate

The consequentialist perspective among current ethical arguments concerning life extension is best captured by examining the recent debate between Walter Glannon and John Harris.⁴ Their debate demonstrates the interminable character of many arguments which rest upon predicted outcomes. Notably absent however, are discussions surrounding the development of character and the significance of bodily for such character development.

Walter Glannon opposes a 'substantial' lengthening of the human lifespan (e.g. 200 years) due to the discrepancy between psychological and biological continuity, and the negative collective effects of extended life.⁵ His arguments rest upon a distinction between biological and psychological life—both of which are required for personhood—where psychological life "pertains to the capacity of consciousness and

⁴ Walter Glannon, "Identity, Prudential Concern, and Extended Lives," *Bioethics* 16 no. 3 (2002): 266-83; John Harris, "A Response to Walter Glannon," *ibid.*: 284-91; Glannon, "Reply to Harris," *ibid.*: 292-97. Glannon's arguments are also presented in "Extending the Human Life Span," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 27 (2002): 339-354; "Extending the Human Life Span," in *Genes and Future People: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 135-167.

⁵ Glannon, "Identity, Prudential Concern," 266.

the connectedness and continuity of mental states in which personhood and personal identity consist.”⁶ Using Jonathan Swift’s *Struldbruggs* as a negative example, “the continued conscious life of the same person is a necessary condition of the rational desire for a longer life and of prudential concern about one’s future self.”⁷ But even if indefinite life-extension does not entail a similar fate for us, “it is doubtful that we could continuously generate a series of projects that could sustain our desire to go on living indefinitely.”⁸ Basing his claims on evolutionary biology which asserts that the brain attempts to maintain equilibrium between anticipation of future events and memory of past events, he argues that extended life would adversely affect one’s psychological connectedness—the balance of forward-looking desires and backward-looking memories with respect to the conscious present—tipping the scale in favor of the ever-increasing memories of the past at the expense of new projects and anticipatory future events. Glannon’s second argument suggests that indefinite life extension in a world with limited resources would result in a lower quality of life for all. He cites Gregory Kavka’s prediction that one might be offered the choice between (1) extending one’s own life, or (2) retaining the right to reproduce, foregoing life extension.⁹ This is an undesirable situation.

In his third argument, Glannon returns to psychological connectedness and prudential concern. He believes that this connectedness is what most matters to us: “I assume that these states will be *mine* and that it will be *me* who exists at that time.”¹⁰ But this connectedness can only diminish over time. Therefore, not only will our identity fade over time, but our prudential concern for the future as well.

Because any mental states in the distant future would be so weakly connected to any present mental states, a substantial extension of

⁶ Glannon, “Identity, Prudential Concern,” 269. He follows Derek Parfit’s definition of personhood as a being who is self-conscious and aware of its identity over time, in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 202.

⁷ Glannon, “Identity, Prudential Concern,” 271.

⁸ Glannon, “Identity, Prudential Concern,” 273.

⁹ Glannon, “Identity, Prudential Concern,” 275, citing Gregory Kavka, “Upside Risks: Social Consequences of Beneficial Biotechnology,” in *Are Genes Us? The Social Consequences of the New Genetics*, ed. C. Cranor (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 162.

¹⁰ Glannon, “Identity, Prudential Concern,” 275.

one's biological and psychological lives would not be desirable from one's present point of view.¹¹

Thus, we are left with a 'Methuselah's Paradox', says Glannon, where "I would cease to exist and a person distinct from me would begin to exist beyond a certain point."¹² Support also comes from evolutionary biology, which sees the primary function of memory for the enhancement of survival into the reproductive stage of life. Thus, life extension would likely upset the delicate protein balance in the brain dealing with long and short-term memory—even should genetic manipulation alter the function of these proteins. He concludes:

Extending the human life span substantially beyond the present norm would be undesirable because the person who underwent the genetic procedure for all practical purposes would have gone out of existence before his biological organism did.¹³

While not opposed to moderate increases in longevity, Glannon opposes life-extension to the point where we are left with the "unpalatable consequence" where a *person* could no longer be considered to be the *same* person. He concludes with a moral reference to Psalm 90:12, urging us to make the days we have in our actual limited lives count.¹⁴

John Harris criticizes Glannon's "vague claims about the undesirable effects of increasing population,"¹⁵ labeling his worries about the limited capacity of the brain 'defeatist,' and contrary to the "spirit of empirical enquiry."¹⁶ The respectable scientific response is to produce immortals *first*, and *then* test the brain hypothesis.¹⁷ Either we create people who live very long lives, says Harris, or no one would exist to be harmed because the successive selves would experience normal life spans. His

¹¹ Glannon, "Identity, Prudential Concern," 276.

¹² Glannon, "Identity, Prudential Concern," 276; Parfit, *Reason and Persons*, 313, n. 8.

¹³ Glannon, "Identity, Prudential Concern," 281.

¹⁴ Glannon, "Identity, Prudential Concern," 282-3. See also John Harris and Søren Holm, "Extending the Human Lifespan and the Precautionary Paradox," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 27 (2002): 355-368.

¹⁵ Harris, "Response to Glannon," 284.

¹⁶ Harris, "Response to Glannon," 285.

¹⁷ Harris, "Response to Glannon," 285. See also 288.

main criticisms however are leveled against the notion of a psychological discontinuity. “Suppose I have no memories earlier than age ten, does it follow that my physical body is ten years older than my identity?”¹⁸ Moreover, Harris suggests that various storage devices could sufficiently supplement one’s memory. With regards to prudential concern, Harris offers his own counter-example, concluding that “no argument . . . shows the irrationality of wishing to be Methuselah even if Methuselah is a succession of selves and not a single personal identity.”¹⁹ Harris instead offers a counter narrative: “I could take as much if not more pride and interest in my ‘line’ of genetically identical and bodily (spatio-temporally) continuous selves as many do in their ‘line’ of descendents.”²⁰ Harris is critical of Glannon’s arguments which indefensibly slip from uncertainty to ‘ought not;’ “when things are uncertain or doubtful he assumes not only that they cannot be done but also that they shouldn’t be done.”²¹

Turning to the collective concerns, Harris charges Glannon with forgetting that the ‘immortals’ would be productive in society much longer, and thus continue to be productive and pay for themselves and for their youthful citizens.”²² Moreover, the likely expense of this technology would prevent its wide use for at least a millennia. Harris doesn’t flinch in acknowledging that wide spread availability may one day force the immortals to choose between continued life or procreation. While this choice is ‘unpleasant’ for Glannon, it poses little difficulty for Harris. He opts for the freedom to choose over no choice at all. Though he appears troubled by the justice of immortals live alongside immortals, he leaves this unresolved.²³ Ultimately, Harris is not convinced that psychological connectivity and personal identity should inhibit scientific enquiry. Rather, “the task will be to learn to live creatively with such

¹⁸ Harris, “Response to Glannon,” 286.

¹⁹ Harris, “Response to Glannon,” 287.

²⁰ Harris, “Response to Glannon,” 287-8.

²¹ Harris, “Response to Glannon,” 288. Harris and Holm criticize Glannon’s use of the ‘precautionary principle’ in “Extending the Human Lifespan,” 356 ff.

²² Harris, “Response to Glannon,” 289.

²³ Here, Harris refers his readers to his article entitled, “Intimations of Immortality,” in *Science* 288 (2000): 59.

immortals as are eventually produced, until we have time to see whether experience rather than argument proves Glannon right.”²⁴

In his final rejoinder to Harris, Glannon express his concern that longer lives will ultimately deplete our resources, especially if extended life resulted in a prolonged physical and cognitive decline.²⁵ He asserts the relief of suffering from disease carries more moral weight than extending the lives of the healthy, even though life extension technology allows us to treat aging as a disease.²⁶ Glannon is equally troubled by the issue of distributive justice, a point of which Harris seems largely unconcerned. Hence, “these two moral points provide moral grounds for not allowing people to extend their lives beyond the present norm.”²⁷ Glannon also restates his concern about longer lives and identity, maintaining that it is rational to forego extended life if there is no continuity between selves:

Just because the life span of a body can be extended into the future does not imply that the life span of a person constituted by, but not identical to, that body will be extended as well.²⁸

He also remains skeptical of any idea of memory enhancement of the brain, asserting that memory enhancement would diminish the ability to learn new things. Finally, Glannon criticizes Harris’ scientific spirit given that our moral judgment often lags behind biotechnology.²⁹

Glannon’s arguments against life extension represent a consequentialist and utilitarian appeal of sorts, wedded to biological and psychological conceptions of personhood as determinative. Coupled to this appeal is the well-rehearsed argument citing the potential further diminishment of natural resources that are likely to come with longer lives. On the other hand, Harris’ faith in science to manage and correct

²⁴ Harris, “Response to Glannon,” 291.

²⁵ Glannon, “Reply to Harris,” 292.

²⁶ Glannon, “Reply to Harris,” 292-3.

²⁷ Glannon, “Reply to Harris,” 293.

²⁸ Glannon, “Reply to Harris,” 294.

²⁹ Glannon, “Reply to Harris,” 297.

any problems, unforeseen or otherwise,³⁰ leads him to reject Glannon's arguments as too conservative. Even if science is unable to 'solve' potential brain limitations, Harris sees no reason why the possibility of developing multiple sequential identities over time should prevent us from trying to slow down the aging process to extend human life.

Christine Overall

Most recently, Christine Overall has examined the prospect of life extension from a largely consequentialist perspective, arguing in favor of life extension given that many people want longer lives, that this life is the only one we have and that many older people have been deprived of life's goods, and finally because living longer is the prerequisite for further opportunities, experiences, and action.³¹ Though Overall presupposes that death represents a surcease of the development of future human potential, she discerns no inevitable relationship between one's spiritual beliefs and one's attitude towards earthly longevity, asserting that a belief in an afterlife "does not obviate questions about the value of a longer life before death."³² While this may indeed be true, it is significant that Overall explicitly eschews any reference to tradition or any particular religious worldview, insisting that longevity must be considered for its own sake. Moreover, her approach deliberately excludes any inferences that might be drawn from the very nature of embodiment and the limits such embodiment entails. For Overall, current biological restrictions on human longevity have neither moral nor normative force.³³ While she expresses concern that life be wrongly accorded 'absolute value,' she also asserts that no one has the right

³⁰ Wendell Berry has quipped that science will be able to "find solutions to all the problems resulting from their solutions to all the problems we used to have." Joel James Shuman, *The Body of Compassion: Ethics, Medicine, and the Church* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 16, quoting Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community: Eight Essays* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1993), n. p.

³¹ Christine Overall, *Aging, Death, and Human Longevity: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 14, 122. See also "Longevity, Identity, and Moral Character: A Feminist Approach," in *Fountain of Youth*, 286-303. Overall does reject indefinite extension given the earth's limited resources, the likelihood of enforced limits on procreation, and physical limitations of the brain, *Aging*, 133-173.

³² Overall, *Aging*, 14.

³³ Overall, *Aging*, 35.

so say the current average lifespan is ‘long enough,’ for such a notion is “an excessively and unjustifiably biologicistic view of the nature of human existence.”³⁴

Overall does however express concern over the kinds of people we might become with extended lives, conceding that longer lives will necessitate a new morality. She advocates a “feminist virtue ethics approach”³⁵ with particular attention to the personal and social contexts in making moral decisions, increased attunement to the marginalized and oppressed (most notably the aged), and the cultivation of the capacity for nurture and the ability to listen.³⁶ Moreover, she advocates an ‘affirmative prolongevityism’ where efforts at increasing life expectancy are focused on the disadvantaged—the poor, native people, those of color, and those whose life expectancy is currently lower than that of the more privileged.³⁷ Yet, one wonders how realistic this proposal is. Martha B. Holstein has offered her own feminist reflections on anti-aging medicine, rejecting such technology because it is likely to exacerbate the very prejudices, injustices, and discriminatory behavior already prevalent in our society.³⁸ It is interesting to observe that while Overall is concerned with the development of virtue, she nevertheless turns her focus away from the body, even as she acknowledges that embodiment is what makes us human.³⁹ She strongly resists grounding moral claims metaphysically in the human body or the natural, locating her claim primarily in the development for future human flourishing. Yet, I wonder how one could develop any virtue apart from one’s body, as we shall soon see. In this regard Overall’s approach is considerably voluntarist, giving precedence to one’s will to either extend life and opportunities for future human flourishing, while at the same time not disparaging those who would choose to abstain.

³⁴ Overall, *Aging*, 50.

³⁵ Overall, “Longevity,” 293.

³⁶ Overall, “Longevity,” 294-299.

³⁷ Overall, “Longevity,” 287.

³⁸ “A Feminist Perspective on Anti-Aging Medicine,” *Generations: The Journal of the Western Gerontological Society* 25 (Winter 2001-2002): 38-43.

³⁹ Overall, *Aging*, 182.

For the most part, the arguments presented here—either for or against—are heavily predicated upon likely outcomes. The most common arguments against life extension refer to the potential future impact, from the unknown side-effects, diversion of scarce resources, prolonged disability, and ecological imbalances, to boredom, pathology, and the virtues of aging.⁴⁰ The arguments of Glannon, Harris, and Overall uncover one of the substantial problems of any consequentialist calculus construed largely in terms of costs and benefits, namely, the difficulty in predicting the widely diverse potential outcomes of life extension technology. Under a consequentialist calculus, a perfectly logical rejoinder to any expressed reservations concerning the potential downsides to extended lives is, as Harris argues, *to actually do it first*, and *then* decide whether the desired or undesired effects are sufficient to take further action.

There is a more glaring problem however in considering the likely outcome of particular actions as the primary determinant in choosing a course of action. For consequentialism entails, in theory, pursuing any means necessary in order to attain the desired end—“the end justifies the means”—though in practice most people typically place *some* constraints on the means by which desired ends are attained. Consequentialism has been alternately described as simply promoting what one values. “Consequentialism is the view that whatever values an individual or institutional agent adopts, the proper response to those values is to promote them.”⁴¹ Consequentialism subsumes the ‘right’ under the ‘good,’ where the determination of the ‘good’ up to the moral agent. Thus, if one considers a longer healthier life *good*—for whatever reason—then it is *right* to pursue a longer life by any means possible.

Nevertheless, what is noticeably absent in such a calculus are notions of who we *are* as moral agents, and who we *might become* through getting what we want. There is

⁴⁰ Harold R. Moody, “Who’s Afraid of Life Extension?” *Generations: The Journal of the Western Gerontological Society* 25 (Winter 2001-2002): 33-37. Daniel Callahan argues that aging retardation will most likely *extend* the period of morbidity. See President’s Council, “Duration of Life,” <http://www.bioethics.gov/transcripts/dec02/session2.html>, and *Troubled Dream*.

⁴¹ Philip Pettit, “Consequentialism,” in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 231.

nothing inherent in consequentialism that gives one pause to consider whether or not one's desires or projects are worth pursuing in the first place. In many cases the presupposition that a longer life is the prerequisite for any future goods in life is requirement enough to pursue life extension by attenuating the aging process. One's desires are simply taken for granted. Consequentialism invites us to stand outside a situation as 'mere observers.'⁴² There seems to be little, if any, possibility of being refined by the struggle in recognizing that some desires are not worth pursuing. Consequentialism substantially mutes words of Paul, who urges us not to be conformed to this world but rather to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2).⁴³ There is no room for a reordering of one's desires within a consequentialist framework, a reordering which finds its orientation in the will of God as made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ and his redeeming and reconciling action with all of creation. Much less is consequentialism able to provide an adequate account for situations where one carries out precisely what one doesn't desire, when one knows the good yet doesn't do it. That is, consequentialism has no way of accounting for the sin which often hinders us from doing what we rightly desire to do (Romans 7:18-19). This is not to say that consequences are completely irrelevant in ethical reflection. Jesus urged his would be disciples to 'count the cost' (Luke 14:28-32), and Paul warned fellow believers to consider how their actions might impact others (1 Corinthians 8:9; Colossians 3:21). Nevertheless, consequentialism substitutes a highly reductionist calculus in place of moral reflection situated within metanarrative, memory, and tradition, wherein the moral significance of the body might be appropriately grounded.

Life Extension and appeals to Nature and Virtue

While consequentialism largely ignores any controlling metanarrative within which the body might be appropriately construed as playing a crucial role in the development of character, there are a few thinkers who have given attention to character and the significance of embodiment in the context of aging attenuation. Indeed, Leon Kass, Hans Jonas, and Daniel Callahan offer a depth of reflection that

⁴² Banner, *Christian Ethics*, 95.

⁴³ Banner, *Christian Ethics*, 93.

transcends the reductionist consequentialist calculus. While these responses move beyond those of mere cost-benefit analysis, they demonstrate the difficulties in appealing either to nature or to character in the absence of a controlling metanarrative.

Leon Kass

Leon Kass, M.D. and biochemist, first addressed life extension and aging research twenty years ago, motivated by the fact that “no other area of present biomedical research promises such profound alterations of our way of life, not to say of our condition.”⁴⁴ Research into the control of biological aging embodies aims of modern science, says Kass, whose origins may be traced to Bacon and Descartes.⁴⁵ Both founded a science, says Kass, “whose explicit purpose was to reverse the curse laid on Adam and Eve, and especially to restore the tree of life, by means of the tree of (scientific) knowledge,” a goal in serious need of questioning.⁴⁶ Like most scientists and researchers, he sees a difference between aging and disease, defining aging as the basic biological processes whereby the body becomes increasingly less able to maintain itself and perform its various functions. Though Kass considers the ‘biologically determined’ limit on longevity to be between ninety and one hundred years, he disavows any notion of finding ‘precise rules of conduct’ which might be “deducible from even the fullest knowledge of nature.”⁴⁷ For the purposes of his

⁴⁴ Leon R. Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 300. This chapter has been republished with minor alterations as “L’Chaim and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality?” in *First Things* 113 (May 2001): 17-24. It also appears as a chapter in his more recent work entitled *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002), 257-274. Kass’ influence is also evident in President’s Council, *Beyond Therapy: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*. Many of his arguments discussed in this chapter are rehearsed in chapter 4, “Ageless Bodies,” 159-204.

⁴⁵ René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, ed. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 119-120. For an analysis of Kass’ methodology, see McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition*, 108-146, esp. 128-32. Elsewhere Kass defines the ‘Baconian anthem’ as “Conquer Nature, relieve man’s estate” in *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*, 4.

⁴⁶ Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*, 261.

⁴⁷ *Toward a More Natural Science*, 347.

analysis, Kass assumes the most attractive prospect—an increased lifespan of twenty or more years matched with an increase in vigor.⁴⁸

He first considers the broader social consequences of such an increase by looking at population age distributions, employment patterns and their impact on the retirement age, family dynamics, and the possibility of a greatly increased elderly population. Granting the notion that the world would be able to adjust soon enough, accepting for the moment the idea that longer life is an unqualified good, Kass invokes the slippery slope argument in demonstrating how the normative force of the current biological life span is undermined in extending life, asking “how *much* longer life is an unqualified good for an individual?”⁴⁹ For Kass, the only logical answer is that *no* limit should be set, given the simplistic binary thinking of modernity that “life is good and death is bad.”⁵⁰ While he might be accused of caricaturing those who support aging research, there are some who are perfectly happy with an indefinite prolongation of life, as evidenced in a recent debate between Kass and Rabbi Neil Gillmann. When Kass asked Gillman whether it was worth pursuing an indefinite prolongation of life, Gillman’s response was an emphatic “Yes, yes, yes.”⁵¹

Kass might very well see Rabbi Gillman’s attitude as the embodiment of a much larger cultural sentiment: “the attachment to life—or the fear of death—knows no limits, certainly not for most human beings. . . . We want to live and live, and not to wither and not to die.”⁵² Kass believes however, that any success against death will only make it appear even more untimely, shocking, and unbearable.

It is highly likely that either a modest prolongation of life with vigor or even only a preservation of youthfulness with no increase in longevity would make death even less acceptable, and would

⁴⁸ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 301.

⁴⁹ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 305.

⁵⁰ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 305.

⁵¹ Ronald Bailey, “Intimations of Immortality Part II,” *Reason Magazine*, 6 March, 1999. <http://reason.com/opeds/rb030600.shtml>. For another example, see Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Human Dignity*, 258-259.

⁵² Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 306. See for instance, Nagel, *View From Nowhere*, 224.

exacerbate the desire to keep pushing it further away . . . unless, for some reason, such life should also prove to be less satisfying.⁵³

More recently, Kass has argued that our very humanity is at stake; “to argue that human life would be better without death is, I submit, to argue that human life would be better being something other than human.”⁵⁴ Moreover, says Kass, “confronting our own death—or the deaths of our beloved ones—provides an opportunity for the exercise of our humanity, for the great and small alike.”⁵⁵

Having suggested that there is no reasonable limit to the amount of years we would desire, at least as long as our health remained relatively in tact, Kass argues for the virtues of mortality, attending to the fact that we must die. Here he treads more cautiously, denying for instance, any virtue in the death of a child, acknowledging the pain that accompanies any death. In arguing his case for mortality, Kass observes four problems of an extended life span. The first is *boredom* and *tedium*⁵⁶ that would likely accompany even a modest increase in life span. The underlying fear of boredom, says Kass, is “that sooner or later the world and its objects will fail *us*.”⁵⁷ He notes that in medieval thought boredom was considered a defect within oneself; boredom meant that *we* will have failed the world. “In many ways, perhaps in the most profound ways, most of us go to sleep long before our deaths.”⁵⁸ Over time, hopes, ambitions, dreams and aspirations give way and die before we do. The second problem concerns life’s *seriousness*⁵⁹ or meaningfulness in the absence of limits. “To number our days is the condition for making them count, to treasure and appreciate all that life brings.”⁶⁰ While acknowledging that there are some activities that do not need finitude as a spur (e.g. understanding), he believes that such activities are rare.

⁵³ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 307.

⁵⁴ Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*, 265.

⁵⁵ Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*, 21.

⁵⁶ Kass refers to these as “interest and engagement” in *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*, 266. See Carl Elliott, who speaks of a ‘hardening of the categories’ which is otherwise known as ‘ontological diminution,’ *Better Than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2003), 276-283.

⁵⁷ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 309.

⁵⁸ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 317.

⁵⁹ Kass adds “aspiration” to seriousness in *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*, 266.

⁶⁰ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 309.

Thus, life without limits would give life little meaning. The third problem concerns *beauty*.⁶¹ Citing the poet Wallace Stevens who says that death is the mother of beauty,⁶² Kass surmises that Stevens is speaking of the beauty of impermanence, like that of a flower or a sunset. He suggests that our appreciation of such things depends on our appreciation of our own mortality. “Does not love swell before the beautiful precisely on the recognition that it (and we) will not always be?”⁶³ Finally, Kass argues that without mortality, we could not cultivate character, virtue, and moral excellence that come from rising above that attachment to survival.⁶⁴ Like Odysseus’s refusal of immortality, he concludes that “to suffer, endure, to trouble oneself for the sake of home, family, and genuine friendship, is truly to live, and is the clear choice of this exemplary mortal.”⁶⁵

At this point Kass concedes that indefinite life might require no need for engagement, beauty or virtue.⁶⁶ If this however were the case, asks Kass, “why do so many teach the promise of life after death, of something eternal, of something imperishable?”⁶⁷ Hence, he considers why humans seek immortality as a question of primary importance. The answer lies in the soul’s natural disposition, a longing after “some condition, some state, some goal toward which our earthly activities are directed but which cannot be attained during earthly life.”⁶⁸ Thus, “our distress with mortality is the derivative manifestation of the conflict between the transcendent longings of the soul and the all-too-finite powers and fleshly concerns of the body.”⁶⁹ Research on aging is just another manifestation of humanity’s desire for transcendence through immortality.⁷⁰ Kass’ musings here sound distinctly Platonic.

⁶¹ Kass adds “love” to seriousness in *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*, 267.

⁶² Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 66-70.

⁶³ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 310.

⁶⁴ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 310-11.

⁶⁵ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 311.

⁶⁶ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 311.

⁶⁷ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 311.

⁶⁸ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 312.

⁶⁹ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 312.

⁷⁰ See McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition*, 128.

Indeed, he agrees with Plato's Socrates that such longings of the soul—the *eros* of the soul for the noetic vision—cannot be fulfilled: “*philosophia*, yes, the love and pursuit of wisdom, yes, but its possession, no.”⁷¹

Kass also sees the events in Genesis as an example of human aspiration as well, where that first, fateful act of autonomy separated us from God.

The expulsion from the Garden merely ratifies our estrangement from God and testifies to our insufficiency, of which our accompanying mortality is but a visible sign—or perhaps even God's gift to put an end to our sad awareness and deficiency.⁷²

These accounts of human aspiration from Socrates to Genesis, attest to certain “decisive facts” concerning man's desire for immortality; namely, that man longs not so much for deathlessness, but wholeness, wisdom, and goodness, a longing however, that cannot be satisfied in our current embodied, earthly life.⁷³ Hence, “*no amount of ‘more of the same’ will satisfy our own deepest aspirations.*”⁷⁴ Moreover, he notes that such a view finds coherence with the Christian doctrine of the resurrection, which is about redemption and wholeness in the presence of God. Hence, life extension can only distract the soul from its natural inclinations. Only within the context of mortality and finitude can the soul get down to the business of living well. “Once we acknowledge and accept our finitude, we can concern ourselves with living well, and care first and foremost for the well-being of our souls, and not so much for their mere existence.”⁷⁵ But what if there is no such thing as a soul? Kass identifies a biological version of transcendence in reproduction, asking “is it not possible that aging and mortality are part of this construction, and that the rate of aging and life span have been selected for their usefulness to the task of reproduction?”⁷⁶ In contrast to the narcissistic goal of transcendence through life extension, Kass emphasizes *perpetuation* as an achievable goal, and one in tune with

⁷¹ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 313.

⁷² Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 313.

⁷³ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 313-14.

⁷⁴ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 314.

⁷⁵ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 314.

⁷⁶ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 316.

nature. For life extension could be hostile to children, who are themselves a reminder of our own mortality.⁷⁷

In summary, Kass opposes life extension because it adversely affects the aims of a dignified human life—engagement, seriousness, beauty, and love—aims which only gain their coherence and force within the limits of our own finitude. Thus, death is not really the problem, but the soul’s pursuit of transcendence. Hence, it is not deathlessness which humankind really seeks, but wholeness and goodness. Kass finds the common thread of transcendence, whether one adopts a Platonic-idealistic or Aristotelian metaphysic, the Christian doctrine of eternal life, or a material worldview in strictly biological terms. Kass’ rhetorical urgency has come in part by interacting with a broad range of sources from the Hebrew Scriptures⁷⁸ to Plato, in constructing somewhat of a virtue theory response to life extension by appealing in part to the transient nature of embodiment. Kass rightly detects a significant shift in science with the loss of teleology inaugurated in the work of Bacon and Descartes,⁷⁹ and seeks to resituate the desire for longer life in the tension between the limited body and one’s limitless desires. He is considerably aided in this by drawing upon Greek philosophy, though he invokes Genesis as well. While Kass remains skeptical of deducing any determinative action based on nature itself, he appears to recognize that his appeal to virtue is considerably enhanced within a particular metanarrative, even if it is not the Christian narrative. Ironically, Kass’ reflection on life extension are more profound and reflective than the Christian ethicists I will address later in this chapter.

Hans Jonas

Hans Jonas appears equally wary of the advances in biochemical research, and questions the desirability of an extended lifespan, citing Psalm 90:12—“teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom”—as a statement which submits

⁷⁷ Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science*, 316.

⁷⁸ One of Kass’ most recent works, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), represents a philosophical reflection on Genesis in search of wisdom.

⁷⁹ *Toward a More Natural Science*, 249-275. Kass addresses this subject in *Life, Liberty, and the Defense of Dignity*.

to the reality of finitude, an expression which knows full well that “nothing of this was in the realm of doing and effective decision.”⁸⁰ Jonas claims that in the extreme, the abolishment of death would require the abolishment of birth, “for the latter is life’s answer to the former.”⁸¹ But even moderate life extension threatens youth and the newness that comes with each generation, a newness that no accumulation of experience can ever match, a newness, which, according to Plato, is the beginning of philosophy.

Anthropologically, Jonas has two primary concerns. First, that extended life will bring a diminishment in philosophical wonder and an increase in boredom.

This ever renewed beginning, which is only to be had at the price of ever repeated ending, may well be mankind’s hope, its safeguard against lapsing into boredom and routine, its chance of retaining the spontaneity of life.⁸²

His second point concerns the individual role of *memento mori*, and “what its attenuation to indefiniteness may do to it.”⁸³ Jonas’ concerns are subsumed under his primary desire to metaphysically ground a new ethic which avoids the naturalistic fallacy, ever critical of reductionistic materialism, Cartesian dualism and idealism.

Jonas considers human finitude as both a blessing and a burden.⁸⁴ Death is a burden in that man *can* die, and a blessing in that he *must* die.⁸⁵ In arguing against life extension, Jonas seeks an ontological grounding for the possibility and the ultimate necessity of death. Organisms, says Jonas, are entities whose being is defined by their own *doing*—to be is to do and to cease doing is to cease being. Therefore, metabolism is the defining property of life and the basic ontological link between life and death, as all living beings must exchange matter through metabolism.⁸⁶ Through

⁸⁰ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, trans. Hans Jonas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 18.

⁸¹ Jonas, *Imperative of Responsibility*, 19.

⁸² Jonas, *Imperative of Responsibility*, 19.

⁸³ Jonas, *Imperative of Responsibility*, 19.

⁸⁴ Hans Jonas, “The Burden and Blessing of Mortality,” *Hastings Center Report* 22 (1992): 34-40. For an insightful critique of the ethics of Han Jonas, see McKenny, *To Relieve*, 39-75.

⁸⁵ Again, Jonas refers to Psalm 90.

⁸⁶ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 34-5.

the process of metabolism, life can be said to carry death within itself.⁸⁷ Yet, life itself entails the fear of death. This is what Jonas means when he says that man *can* die. “Life has in it the sting of death that perpetually lies in wait, ever again to be staved off, and precisely the challenge of the no stirs and powers the yes.”⁸⁸ Jonas sees mortality as “the narrow gate through which alone *value*” enters the universe.⁸⁹ What then is the reward for this constant threat of non-being? Jonas says that the highest value is the capacity for feeling that emerged somewhere in the process of evolution.⁹⁰ What makes survival worthwhile is the awareness of the struggle and the feelings accompanying it. “Even the sickest of us, if he wants to live on at all, wants to do so thinking and sensing, not merely digesting.”⁹¹ Turning to mortality in the second sense—that man *must* die—Jonas focuses on aging, which, he considers beneficial, given that evolution has let it arise. Inherent in the term ‘evolution’ is what Jonas calls “the *creative* role of individual finitude, which has decreed that whatever lives *must* also die.”⁹² Acknowledging that science has enabled more of us to die of attrition, he considers whether the indefinite lengthening of life is a legitimate goal of medicine by examining the concepts of common and individual good.

When discussing the common good, Jonas invokes arguments similar to those offered in his earlier work in claiming that humanity’s feats and faults could not even come about had we not experienced “the ever-repeated turnover of the generations.”⁹³ Drawing upon Hannah Arendt’s concept of ‘natality,’ Jonas asserts that without the constant arrival of youth, “the wellspring of novelty would dry up, for those grown older have found their answers and gotten set in their ways.”⁹⁴ Natality is the means by which creativity and novelty are sustained, avoiding boredom and routine.

⁸⁷ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 35.

⁸⁸ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 36.

⁸⁹ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 36.

⁹⁰ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 36-7.

⁹¹ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 37.

⁹² Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 38.

⁹³ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 39.

⁹⁴ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 39.

The ever-renewed beginning, which can only be had at the price of ever-repeated ending, is mankind's safeguard against lapsing into boredom and routine, its chance of retaining the spontaneity of life.⁹⁵

Moreover, says Jonas, the added bonus of natality is the uniqueness of each new individual. But natality also gets its scope from death—as new individuals are born, older ones must pass out of existence. “The dying of the old makes place for the young.”⁹⁶ Bemoaning the threat of overpopulation by medicine's advance against premature death, Jonas questions whether it is wise to lengthen life further, asking whether we should be trying to outwit the “naturally ordained, biological timing” of our mortality.⁹⁷ Jonas strives for a morality grounded in nature. Indeed, he likens the search to forestall human aging as “extorting from nature.”⁹⁸ For Jonas, the answer to the aforementioned question is obviously ‘no,’ for the good of humankind. In light of the rich cultural harvest of the ages, says Jonas, mortality should be considered a blessing.

When turning his attention to the individual good however, Jonas briefly entertains the suggestion that a longer lifespan might be valuable to select individuals. He turns to Jonathan Swift's horrific account of those few ‘lucky’ immortals, the Struldbruggs of Luggnagg, who, while born immortal, were not immune to the deleterious effects of aging. One of the features of these most unfortunate creatures concerns their loss memory around the age of ninety where “their Memory will not serve to carry them from the Beginning of a Sentence to the End.”⁹⁹ Jonas asserts that even should science significantly retard the process of aging, there are limits to what the brain could accumulate and store. We could go on interminably “only at the price of either *losing* the past and therewith our real identity, or living *only* in the past and therefore without real present.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, Jonas concludes:

Not even the fountains of youth, which biotechnology may have to offer one day to circumvent the physical penalties of it, can justify the

⁹⁵ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 39.

⁹⁶ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 39.

⁹⁷ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 39.

⁹⁸ “Burden and Blessing,” 40.

⁹⁹ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 205.

¹⁰⁰ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 40.

goal of extorting from nature more than its original allowance to our species for the length of our days.¹⁰¹

Finally, alluding again to Psalm 90, he speaks of the “non-negotiable limit” which should serve as a spur to make our limited days count.¹⁰²

Jonas argues for the normative force of nature and the aging benefits inherent in the evolutionary process which should guard against treating humanity as something to be manipulated or manufactured. Though his arguments appear somewhat consequentialist in nature, his conception of morality as grounded in natural life itself renders this term inadequate.¹⁰³ Life extension represents not only a direct affront to natality, thereby stifling human creativity and ingenuity, but also fails to recognize the inherent desire for life of the planet itself, as evidenced by new births. While Jonas’ concern over life extension, the brain, and identity reflect Glannon’s to some degree, he is most generally concerned that turning technology on ourselves will lead us down an irrevocable path whereby we lose the very tensions that make us human, tensions which are built in to nature, evolution, and embodiment itself. While Jonas rightly recognizes the significance of our very corporeality as a crucial element in moral reflection, his appeals to ‘nature’ suffer for the lack of a narrative in which to situate the place of the body. As will be shown later, the revelatory Christian narrative which speaks of creation, fall, and redemption will provide such a framework.

Daniel Callahan

Daniel Callahan sees life extension research as clear evidence that science has lost its way, and, like Jonas, argues for the recovery of nature as determinative of what

¹⁰¹ Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 40.

¹⁰² Jonas, “Burden and Blessing,” 40.

¹⁰³ For an excellent discussion of Jonas’ ethics, see Richard J. Bernstein, “Rethinking Responsibility,” *Hastings Center Report* 25, Special issue (1995): 13-20; Strachan Donnelley, “Natural Responsibilities: Philosophy, Biology, and Ethics in Ernst Mayr and Hans Jonas,” *Hastings Center Report* 32 (2002): 36-43. Jonas’ appeals to nature are considerably more complex than what I have presented here. For a deeper discussion of Jonas’ ethics and his construal to nature, see McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition*, 39-75.

constitutes a normal lifespan.¹⁰⁴ Callahan is not against the idea of longer life per se, so long as it is inscribed in the traditional medical goals of treating disease and promoting healthy lifestyles.¹⁰⁵ The trouble lies in medicine's vision of human well being which increasingly looks upon death "as a correctable biological deficiency," thereby misleading us into thinking that illness, and even mortality itself is not to be integrated into a balanced view of life, but resisted.¹⁰⁶ Hence, scientific research is working against nature's limit of death to the point where "death has no meaningful place within the rationale and goals of scientific medicine, whose latent purpose is to overcome death."¹⁰⁷ While death is acknowledged as inevitable in general terms, it is coupled with the idea that death in the particular is contingent.¹⁰⁸ Callahan does not deny that death can be bad, but sees *finitude* as the primary enemy and "our ultimately unrequited longing for more than we have."¹⁰⁹ Thus, he calls for a recovery of a 'mortal self' that recognizes our own fragility and contingency, things the Greeks asserted made life compelling and beautiful.¹¹⁰ The 'mortal self' resists the temptation to locate one's identity in the ability to manipulate or control death, and foregoes the self-corruption that may occur by obsessive avoidance of pain, suffering, and dependency.¹¹¹ Like Cole, Callahan is anxious to capture the dual nature of death, asserting that while death is a part of life, it is also an enemy.¹¹² In the current clinical medical climate however, the former has been eclipsed by the latter. "The meaning of death, once so troubling and elusive, has now become the

¹⁰⁴ See Daniel Callahan, *The Troubled Dream of Life: Living With Mortality* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), especially chapter 2.

¹⁰⁵ Daniel Callahan, *False Hopes: Why America's Quest for Perfect Health is a Recipe for Failure* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 253. Callahan however, is against the use of medicine to prolong the life of the aged, preferring instead that medicine be used to reduce the suffering of the aged. See also *Setting Limits: Medical Goals in an Aging Society* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); *Troubled Dream*, 228-229.

¹⁰⁶ Callahan, *Troubled Dream*, 58.

¹⁰⁷ Callahan, *Troubled Dream*, 73. Callahan understands 'scientific medicine' as "the ideology, and the particular methods of research and treatment that constitute the heart of modern medicine." 73.

¹⁰⁸ Callahan, *Troubled Dream*, 75.

¹⁰⁹ Callahan, *Troubled Dream*, 84-85.

¹¹⁰ Callahan, *Troubled Dream*, 123.

¹¹¹ Callahan, *Troubled Dream*, 126-127.

¹¹² Death can be considered an enemy or a 'biological evil,' says Callahan, when the timing and circumstances are wrong, and as a 'moral evil' when it ought not to have occurred, either by an act of commission or omission, *Troubled Dream*, 184.

scientific problem of death, to be attacked and mastered.”¹¹³ Recapturing our mortal self frees us from the relentless pursuit of autonomy over biological necessity.¹¹⁴ Not surprisingly then, Callahan opposes efforts to extend life by retarding aging. He believes that the current lifespan of the mid 70s to low 80s affords us enough time to accomplish our goals.¹¹⁵ “More life beyond a certain point seems to offer no proportionate gains.”¹¹⁶ In fact, life extension is antithetical to the mortal self, leading to fundamental character deficiencies.

A self obsessed with control—either to remedy the failures of medicine to give us a biological domination of death, or to express a commitment to the value of self-determination—will be a deficient and defective self, less flexible and protean in the face of mortality than it ought to be.¹¹⁷

Callahan believes that current medical practice and research has only distorted our understanding of death; death has become a medical failure that will one day be under our discrete control. But nature’s current lifespan limits are enough, says Callahan, a fact that will be established recapturing the notion of our mortal self which will preserve our humanity and guard against our unbridled desire for autonomy and life on our own terms.

Critical to Callahan’s arguments are the notion of a ‘natural’ lifespan, though he admits that such a span is somewhat fluid within a fixed biological limit. One can certainly empathize with Callahan’s critique of medicine and its influence over our understanding of death. His conception of the ‘mortal self’ finds resonance with the apostle Paul, who proclaimed “I have been crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:20), and spoke of carrying the death of Jesus in his body that Jesus’ life might be revealed (2 Corinthians 4:10). Moreover, his comments regarding the loss of wisdom inherent in an open-ended future finds theological parallels in Psalm 90. However, he never

¹¹³ Callahan, *Troubled Dream*, 157.

¹¹⁴ Callahan, *Troubled Dream*, 126.

¹¹⁵ Callahan, *False Hopes*, 82; see also 133.

¹¹⁶ Callahan, *False Hopes*, 134.

¹¹⁷ Callahan, *Troubled Dream*, 228. Callahan is also concerned with how increasing longevity might affect our view of the elderly, “Aging and the Life Cycle: A Moral Norm?” in *A World Growing Old: The Coming Health Care Challenges*, ed. Daniel Callahan, Ruud H.J. ter Meulen, and Eva Topinková (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1995), 25.

really deals with the possibility of treating aging itself to enhance the likelihood of an additional twenty to fifty years of *health*. Callahan is more concerned with the diseases associated with aging. Thus, while the idea of a normative lifespan is somewhat attractive, it is difficult to imagine any widespread agreement on what exactly this figure might be or who would ultimately decide, given especially the fact that those in the most developed nations are living healthier, longer lives.¹¹⁸ Like Jonas, Callahan seeks grounding in the biology of the human body.

The responses by Kass, Jonas, and Callahan present more nuanced moral discussions of life extension which transcend the crude cost-benefit calculi of consequentialist thought by drawing attention to issues of character and embodiment. Yet, they offer differing notions concerning what it is in nature or embodiment in general that ought to serve as normative, whether it be evolution (Kass, somewhat), metabolism and ‘natality’ (Jonas), or one’s ‘mortal self’ (Callahan). While it seems that these thinkers are rightly wary of offering a merely voluntarist response to aging attenuation that is disconnected from anything that might be discerned from a discernable order in nature, they nevertheless struggle to offer any real narrative in which a more coherent, compelling account of both nature and the human body might be put forward. Certainly, the difficulties of recognizing any moral component to nature are more adequately addressed from a Christian perspective which recognizes nature as God’s good creation, a creation which carries a distinct christological component.¹¹⁹ I turn now to consider two such accounts which have been offered within a largely Christian framework.

Theological Responses to Life Extension

To date there has been little serious reflection on life extension via aging attenuation from a Christian perspective. Moreover, what little has been written fails to address issues of character and the role the body in character formation. While the following

¹¹⁸ Hauerwas shares similar concerns, as the concept of normative as decided by the masses underwrites many troubling assumptions of modern liberalism. See *Naming the Silences*, 109-110 fn. 7.

¹¹⁹ O’Donovan’s *Resurrection and Moral Order* is one of the more substantial works in this regard.

two treatments by Ronald Cole-Turner and Michael J. Reiss are offered from within a Christian framework, their accounts fail to address the reality of the incarnation and the implications for embodiment, which might have otherwise qualified their support for research into life extension.

Ronald Cole-Turner

Cole-Turner argues that life extension via aging retardation is warranted given God's continuing creative and redeeming activity in the world, a redeeming activity inscribed by the Gospels which portray a Jesus who took delight in nature, but also altered it to restore it.¹²⁰ For Cole-Turner, the actions of Jesus provide a framework for evaluating genetic defects, defects which are discerned by examining Jesus' activity in the Gospels insofar as they illumine God's intentions.¹²¹ These defects are skin diseases, mental and neurological disorders, losses in hearing, sight, the usage of limbs among other unnamed diseases.¹²² It follows then, that "that which is defective is that which may be changed or altered" by technology.¹²³ In this way, genetic engineering can be viewed theologically as redemptive and creative technology.

Critical to our participation in the created order then, is our assistance in unfolding what Cole-Turner defines as "new dimensions of existence."¹²⁴ Thus, in the final chapter of his *The New Genesis*, he sets out to explore the logic of genetic engineering as a metaphor for God's creative activity. To do this he relies on the notion of the *creatio continua*, emphasizing God's control over the evolutionary unfolding and 'calling forth' of creation and its still uncertain future.¹²⁵ The main question for humanity then is to what extent, through our understanding and technological abilities, will we serve God the creator in this ongoing creative

¹²⁰ Ronald Cole-Turner, *The New Genesis: Theology and the Genetic Revolution* (Louisville, KY: John Knox/Westminster Press, 1993), 80, 83. For further analysis into Cole-Turner's methodology, see my "Life-Extension in Transhumanist and Christian Perspectives: Consonance and Conflict," *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 14 (2005): 69-87.

¹²¹ Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 92.

¹²² Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 91.

¹²³ Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 92.

¹²⁴ Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 98.

¹²⁵ Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 99.

creativity.¹²⁶ “Human work, especially our technology,” asserts Cole-Turner, “may be seen as a partnership with God in the continuing work of creation.”¹²⁷ Wary of the dangers associated with the term ‘co-creator’¹²⁸ however, he modifies it by focusing on God’s redemptive purpose in nature¹²⁹ and the Yahwist creation account which authorizes human beings to create in the natural order.¹³⁰ Cole-Turner asserts that “the Yahwist sees the human work of tilling the ground as something upon which God’s own creative work depends,”¹³¹ allowing our activity of planting to take on new meaning whereby “we begin to see ourselves as participating in an activity of God.”¹³² We are thus invited to construe God’s creativity through the metaphor of our technological ability to manipulate genetic material.¹³³ This construal of our activity resists improper notions of ‘playing God.’ On the contrary,

Genetic engineering does not encroach upon the scope of divine activity. It expands the reach of God’s action, placing a new mode of contact, through our technology, between the Creator and the creation. God now has more ways [to] create, to redeem, and to bring the creation to fulfilment and harmony.¹³⁴

While acknowledging that humanity can use genetic technology for purposes contrary to God’s will, he seems to minimize this possibility. Thus, genetic manipulation is an acceptable means of partaking in creative and redemptive activity,

¹²⁶ Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 100.

¹²⁷ Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 100.

¹²⁸ The term ‘co-creation’ can be traced to Kenneth Vaux, *Subduing the Cosmos: Cybernetics and Man’s Future* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1970), 121-22. It has been subsequently developed by Philip Hefner, “Theology’s Truth and Scientific Formulation,” *Zygon* 23 (1988): 263-79, and “The Evolution of the Created Co-creator,” in *Creation: Theology and Science in Consonance*, ed. T. Peters (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 211-233. Also see Arthur R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), and Ted Peters, *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 161.

¹²⁹ Cole-Turner refers to this as “the noetic priority of redemption”, 102.

¹³⁰ Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 103, commenting on Genesis 2:4 ff. He relies on the findings of Bruce Naidoff, “A Man to Work the Soil: A New Interpretation of Genesis 2-3,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 5 (1978): 2-14; and Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 83.

¹³¹ Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 104.

¹³² Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 105.

¹³³ Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 107-08.

¹³⁴ Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 108.

acknowledging that God is already at work in natural processes; God works through natural process to achieve genetic change and through humans to achieve intentional genetic change.¹³⁵ More recently however, he has appeared more wary of our propensity to view genetics as a rejection of creation and Creator.¹³⁶ Noting recent successes on deterring aging in animals, he asks whether or not we will do this with our own descendents, and considers (rhetorically?) why we should *not* enhance intelligence, height, skin tone or mood.¹³⁷ Here Cole-Turner appears somewhat wary of life extension and other human genetic modifications.

No one knows now what we will learn to do, but it is pretty clear what we want. We are anxious, competitive, offended by age and decline, unable to accept loss. These needs drive our technology, shape its agenda, and ultimately pervert its moral meaning. What begins as a technology to relieve human pain becomes a technology to relieve the pain of being human.¹³⁸

In revisiting the idea of cocreation, he observes that the real problem is our own selfishness.¹³⁹ Yet, somewhat surprisingly, Cole-Turner looks forward to the fact that one day technology will allow us to “add to or alter life on earth” and urges us to use this technology not for our own selfish ends but for God’s glory *as a matter of obedience*; “‘Cocreation’ is not so much a matter of doctrine as of obedience.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, while Cole-Turner is wary of the abuses to which extended life may be put, they are not so severe as to warrant a ban on aging research. Indeed, in a recent debate he argued that life extension would afford more opportunities for spiritual growth and understanding, “a kind of blossoming of our humanity that has not yet been obtained.”¹⁴¹ In construing human redemptive activity as genetic creative activity, Cole-Turner finds warrant for genetic manipulation of the human lifespan as a potential “blossoming of our humanity.”

¹³⁵ Cole-Turner, *New Genesis*, 109.

¹³⁶ Ronald Cole-Turner, “Biotechnology: A Pastoral Reflection,” *Theology Today* 59 (2002):” 42-48.

¹³⁷ Cole-Turner, “Biotechnology,” 45.

¹³⁸ Cole-Turner, “Biotechnology,” 45.

¹³⁹ Cole-Turner, “Biotechnology,” 48.

¹⁴⁰ Cole-Turner, “Biotechnology,” 48.

¹⁴¹ Vida Foubister, “Immortality Quest Raises Ethical Concerns,” *American Medical News*, 3 April 2000.

One wonders how Cole-Turner's affirmation of life extension can be reconciled with Jesus' healing activities apart from considering aging as a problem for our technological expertise. It seems highly questionable however that Jesus viewed aging as something to be overcome, even though he did extend life by healing diseases and bringing the dead back to life. Yet Lazarus, the sick girl, and the boy at Nain all eventually succumbed to death. It may be that life extension is warranted not because it stems from a genetic defect, but because it is part of our task as cocreators. But Cole-Turner's concept of cocreator rests upon a questionable reading of the Yahwist creation account. Moreover, it is also unclear how the Elohist account might affect Cole-Turner's construal of cocreator. Stanley Hauerwas is rightly critical of the notion, finding no biblical warrant for such a term. Rather, "the good news of the creation account is that God completed his creation and that mankind needs do nothing more to see to its perfection. That is exactly why God could call it good and rest—and more importantly invites us to rest within his completed good creation."¹⁴² Indeed, Michael Banner has called for a proper Christian interpretation of the created order through the Sabbath, noting that Barth began his 'special ethics' with just such a reflection, grounding subsequent human activity in the facts of creation, reconciliation, and redemption.¹⁴³ For, a proper interpretation of nature and our engagement with it

is learnt by our responding to God's invitation to share in his Sabbath rest, a rest in which, in contemplation of this creation, and in utter conviction as to God's loving purpose in its ordering, we may put away anxiety, fear, dread or awe and learn instead a simple enjoyment of this order in its complexity, vitality, beauty, and magnificence.¹⁴⁴

Finally, in considering our cocreative activities, I wonder why the term cocreator should be preferred to, or even qualified by, the term *coredeemer* as reflecting a fuller account of God's activity in creation and specifically through Christ. For it

¹⁴² Stanley Hauerwas, "Work as Co-Creation: A Critique of a Remarkably Bad Idea," in *Co-Creation and Capitalism: John Paul II's Laborem Exercens*, ed. John W. Houck and Oliver F. Williams (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1983), 46.

¹⁴³ Michael Banner, *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 223-224. See Karl Barth, *CD III/4*, 47.

¹⁴⁴ "Burke, Barth, and Bioethnology: On Preferring the Sabbath to the Sublime—Some Preliminary Thoughts," in *Re-Ordering Nature: Theology, Society and the New Genetics*, ed. Celia Deane-Drummond, Bronislaw Szerszynski, and Robin Grove White (London: T. & T. Clark, 2003), 75.

seems to me that the notion of cocreators too closely approximates Bacon's ideal of a return to Eden. The notion of coredeemer might give us appropriate pause on the limits of our own making by reflecting on the One who 'made himself nothing' in submitting himself to God in willingly laying down his life for the world, the One who was *not* created, but begotten.¹⁴⁵ While Cole-Turner is not unaware of the dangers of our sinful tendencies, it seems that they are not so severe to foreclose the idea of fashioning a longer life. Insofar as he relies on the concept of cocreation, his support for life extension can be called into question.

Michael J. Reiss

Reiss asks whether reengineering humans for life spans well beyond 'three score and ten' is an indication of our technological hubris, or whether it might be better construed as a restoration of antediluvian longevities.¹⁴⁶ While he predicts that manipulating genes related to aging might grant a limited extension (10 to 15 years), Reiss believes that the most likely scenario for significant increase in longevity will entail full body transplants (excluding one's head), 'above-neck' restorative therapies, and 'localized transplants.'

Given that a ban on research intended to extend human longevity is highly unlikely, Reiss asks whether we should forbid people from living very long healthy lives. The legitimacy of this question is based on the largely unconvincing arguments against life extension, particularly those asserting that it will only contribute to global injustice, or those that suggest that an extended life would become tedious and boring (e.g. Kass, Jonas, and others). In response to the former argument, Reiss finds John Harris' assertion which requires that "strenuous and realistic efforts be made to provide the benefits of the technology justly" as a convincing response to the threat of unequal distribution.¹⁴⁷ Reiss is equally convinced by Harris' construal of

¹⁴⁵ Philippians 2:7, NIV.

¹⁴⁶ "'And in the World to Come, Life Everlasting,'" in *Brave New World? Theology, Ethics, and the Human Genome*, ed. Celia Deane-Drummond (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2003), 49.

¹⁴⁷ Reiss, "World to Come," 56, quoting John Harris' unpublished lecture, "Intimations of Immortality: The Ethics and Justice of Life Extending Therapies," 6.

significant life extension as a ‘side effect’ of treating various illnesses. Under such a construal,

it is difficult to imagine arguments that would be convincing (whether ethically or politically) which restrict (let alone prevent) research into cancers, heart disease, mental impairments and so on on the grounds that such research might lead people to live too long.¹⁴⁸

Yet, to reject life extension via the genetic manipulation of aging or successive transplants by no means requires an abandonment of efforts to cure cancer and other diseases that would allow for a longer life. Moreover, Harris’ construal is highly suspect, given that the search for longevity is motivated in a large part by the recognition that curing diseases—even all known diseases—will result in only a marginal increase in the lifespan. As noted in the previous chapter, it is already widely recognized that any substantial increase in life expectancy and longevity must come from treating aging itself or some other means.¹⁴⁹

In a similar vein, Reiss counters Kass’ arguments by suggesting that numerous *new* projects and undertakings would effectively mitigate the ‘more of the same’ boredom forecasted by Kass. Though Reiss acknowledges that greatly extended lives might increase the fear of death given that one might have much more to lose, he argues that if boredom were to surface over time, one could simply “choose not to postpone death much longer.”¹⁵⁰ This scenario seems to be at the heart of life extension, where death is delayed and domesticated by placing it under the realm of choice, preferably, a choice to be made after it has been determined that life no longer has much to offer. In the case of boredom however, it remains to be seen why euthanasia would not be a preferable option, especially when faced with the possibility of a drawn out death likely to follow from a mere abstention from life-extending technology. In all of these deliberations, Reiss fails to seriously consider the impact of greatly extended lives on one’s character, particularly with respect to the relationship between wisdom

¹⁴⁸ Reiss, “World to Come,” 56.

¹⁴⁹ See Austad, *Why We Age*, 14; Medvedev, “Structural Basis of Aging,” 10-11; and Olshansky, *Quest*, 86, 98, 135.

¹⁵⁰ Reiss, “World to Come,” 59.

and longevity in Psalm 90, which is slightly ironic given the title of the book in which his article has been published.¹⁵¹

His discussion does however take a promising turn when he makes a distinction between scientific immortality—understood as an indefinite prolongation of life—and theological immortality whereby one lives forever. Quoting Paul’s discussion of the perishable putting on the imperishable in 1 Corinthians 15: 51-55, Reiss candidly asks what Paul’s vision of the defeat of death in victorious resurrection has to do with the biotechnological vision which can only offer ‘endless transplants’ or medicines to prolong life.¹⁵² Unfortunately, his answer is less than satisfying. Though he briefly concedes that these two visions may indeed have nothing to do with one another, he suggests that a greater longevity will afford us more time to have a ‘good death,’ though he fails to elaborate on what exactly a good death entails. Ultimately, Reiss suggests that “today’s technological advances could, if interpreted somewhat optimistically, already be seen to have undone some aspects of the original curse.”¹⁵³ This point is hardly arguable. Yet, it is clear that Reiss’ conception of the ‘original curse’ does not rule out the use of technology to greatly extend the human lifespan through successive transplants or genetic engineering, given that Reiss believes that the curse occasioned a loss of immortality and the introduction of physical death into the created order, as well as a gradual reduction in the human lifespan.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, the implications of resurrection of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians—particularly how this event might impact a technological return to the garden of Eden—are not considered.

Though Reiss speaks of the resurrection to come where death will be defeated, he does not appear anxious to link this eschatological fact with the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the One on whom our good future rests. One suspects that any limitation on longevity that may come from a consideration of the life and death of Christ has been minimized by Reiss’ reliance on John Hick’s rather benign

¹⁵¹ Granted, *Theology, Ethics, and the Human Genome* is the subtitle.

¹⁵² Reiss, “World to Come,” 63-64.

¹⁵³ Reiss, “World to Come,” 64.

¹⁵⁴ Reiss, “World to Come,” 61-62.

arguments for life after death. Hick acknowledges, but unsurprisingly minimizes the significance of Jesus' claims to everlasting life, offering a second argument where he reasons that God will sustain our being beyond death given his desire to hold us in a perfect relationship with himself and others.¹⁵⁵ Hick goes on to ask however, whether "it could be an expression of infinite love to create us with immense spiritual potentialities but with so short a career, and often in such inauspicious circumstances, that those potentialities are normally destined never to be fulfilled?"¹⁵⁶ Here Reiss finds a possible justification for life extension, averring that "the second reason Hick cites for the life everlasting might even be satisfied by a very greatly extended lifespan, let alone immortality."¹⁵⁷ That is, a greatly extended life on earth may afford more opportunity for the development of our 'spiritual potentialities.' Though Reiss acknowledges that technological immortality would pose 'major consequences' to the exercise of the virtues of patience and hope, he also points out that true (theological) immortality—where one *cannot* die—forecloses the development of the virtue of physical courage.¹⁵⁸ Reiss' point here is difficult to grasp, for he appears to suggest that eternal life will be somehow deficient in that we will no longer need to practice the virtues so instrumental to the formation of our character, effectively elevating the virtues themselves over against the particular *teleoi* toward which they are oriented. Lost in his discussion of the development of these spiritual potentialities are the claims that Jesus laid upon his would-be disciples (Mark 8:34-35), and what these claims may have to say about attempts to secure a longer, healthier, life.

Reiss deserves credit for introducing theological themes into his discussion of life extension. However, his construal of prelapsarian life in the garden, coupled with his reflections on eternal life will not allow him to rule out life extension altogether, even though he rightly notes the distinction between a scientific and a theological immortality. Moreover, while Reiss considers that a greatly extended life would have an impact (what *kind* of impact, he doesn't say) on the virtues of hope and courage,

¹⁵⁵ John Hick, "Life After Death," in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. A. Richardson and J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1983), 331-334.

¹⁵⁶ Hick, "Life After Death," 332.

¹⁵⁷ Reiss, "World to Come," 62.

¹⁵⁸ Reiss, "World to Come," 62.

he completely omits the relationship between wisdom and longevity in Psalm 90. Finally, though Reiss again is right to recognize Jesus' healing ministry was certainly a visible demonstration of God's in-breaking kingdom, his consideration of life extension is weakened by failing to account for the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and the life we are called to live in light of these facts.

The following survey of ethical responses to life extension reveals the need for a more thorough theological offering which takes into account human activity and flourishing in light of God's activities as revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Such an offering will need to address several issues overlooked by some ethical systems, namely, issues of character development and holiness, issues that consequentialism and utilitarianism fail to address. Moreover, situating life extension within the Christian metanarrative which recognizes not only God's good creation, human fallenness, and bodily redemption, but which also considers the impact of God becoming man in the person of Jesus Christ, upon whom our redemption and reconciliation rests, will provide the grounding necessary to account for the several tensions which have been rightly identified by cultural historians and ethicists, tensions between our limited bodies and our unlimited desires, between death as a friend and death as an enemy. In the remainder of this thesis I address these concerns by looking first at a theological treatments of long life and death in the history of the Christian tradition, after which I will investigate the theology of Athanasius and Karl Barth, who address both longevity and character development in their theologies of the first and last Adam.

Chapter 4: Life, Death, and Longevity in the History of Christian Thought

“Nobody wants to go, no matter how ready they think they are. I’ll tell you a little story about Methuselah. When he arrived finally at the age of nine hundred and sixty-nine, his son began to worry, when would he be ready to die? ‘Pa, it’s your birthday today. You’re nine hundred and sixty-nine, Pa, so what about it?’ ‘So soon, mein kind?’ the old man answered, ‘so soon?’”¹

Moshe

“Each man’s life is but a breath.”

Psalms 39:5b NIV

In formulating a Christian response to life extension via aging retardation, it will be helpful to consider influential thinkers of the Christian faith with respect to the desire for a long(er) life. This chapter will focus on the nature of earthly life, its length, and the closely related issue of death by focusing on important figures at pivotal moments in the Christian history: Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Søren Kierkegaard. Each of these theologians have reflected on these issues from a unique perspective, yet always informed by Scripture. Hence, what follows is a consideration of the larger questions surrounding life extension: the nature and length of earthly life as well as our desire to extend it, including the implications of more time on this earth.

Augustine (354-430)

Unlike the sentiment embodied in many affluent, western cultures, the sentiment ‘if life is good, then more life is better’ is strikingly absent in early Christian thought. Two verses which Augustine tended to use in conjunction were Ephesians 5:16 which speaks of the days as ‘evil,’ and Wisdom 9:15: “For a perishable body weighs

¹ Moshe was a patient in a Jewish retirement center, quoted by Barbara Meyerhoff, *Numbering Our Days* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 198-199.

down the soul, and this earthly tent burdens the thoughtful mind.”² Wisdom 9 was clearly in view when Augustine spoke of the nature of this earthly life.

So aren't the days evil, then, which we spend in this wasting away of the flesh, in or rather under this colossal burden of the perishable body, among such great trials, such difficulties, where pleasure deceives, where there's no certainty of joy, where fear torments, greed is grasping, sorrow makes a desert of life?³

Elsewhere he asserts that man “is in death from the very beginning of his existence in this body.”⁴ He frequently referred to earthly life as just one long process of dying.⁵ Life for Augustine is “chockablock with groanings right up till decrepit old age. The whole thing is ‘nasty, brutish, and short,’ and yet how people go after it!”⁶ He speaks of the ‘innumerable evils’ that threaten our bodies, from excessive heat and cold, storms and lightening, to falling buildings, demons, and rabid dogs.⁷ Abundant too are diseases, “so numerous that all the books of the physicians cannot contain them,” leading him to conclude that this “state of life [is] so miserable that it is like a hell on earth” from which there is no escape except through Christ.⁸

It would be a mistake however, to say that the mature Augustine viewed this earthly life as evil, and equally incorrect to read his earlier Manichean leanings into these negative portraits of embodied life on earth. Though his catalog of the miseries of life is oft-quoted, he immediately follows it with a longer chapter on the blessings of life, including blessings of the mind to “drink in wisdom” and achieve the virtues of “prudence, fortitude, temperance and justice,” giving us “the capacity to live well and achieve immortal happiness.”⁹ Other blessings include medicines and remedies

² Wisdom of Solomon 9:15, RSV. See for instance Sermon 84.2, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, Part III, *Sermons*, trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1991-1997), vol. 3, 389.

³ Sermon 84.2, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 3, 389.

⁴ *City of God* XIII.10, 551.

⁵ Sermon 305A.8, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 8, 330-331; *City of God*, XIII, 10, 550-551.

⁶ Sermon 108.3, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 4, 128; Sermon 302.5, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 8, 303; *On the Trinity* XIII.7.10, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 3, 171.

⁷ *City of God* XXII.23, 1156.

⁸ *City of God* XXII.23, 1156.

⁹ *City of God* XXII. 24, 1159-1161. See also Sermon 280.3, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 8, 73, where Augustine acknowledges that though life is short and painful, nevertheless it is sweet.

for restoring health, herbal seasonings devised “to whet the appetite and please the palate,” rivers of poetry and other writings.¹⁰ God’s providence is evident in our very bodies, in form, shape, and stature—even those things that have no apparent use, like man’s beard or the nipples on his chest.¹¹ Despite these good things in life however, this life is still considered difficult and brief. If the promise of an eternal life of peace makes true happiness on this earth an unattainable goal, so too does it make this life incomparably short. Eternal life not only makes this life *seem* short by comparison; this life actually *is* short. While life appears short today, the criterion by which such an assessment is made falls along the lines adumbrated earlier by Thomas R. Cole; this life is short because we have unlimited desires in a limited body. As will be evident shortly, Augustine flatly rejects this line of thinking.

In a sermon on Psalm 146 Augustine wonders how anyone could speak of a long life on this earth, given the life to come, reasoning that “as long as I live” cannot be referring to this temporal life, but eternal life, for no one could truthfully say such a thing about this life “in which nothing is long.”¹² He likens life to a ‘mist’ and our bodies to ‘dust.’¹³ “From the first moments of infancy to decrepit old age is a very short space of time.”¹⁴ While Augustine was familiar with death and its imminence, given especially that many didn’t survive until adulthood, he considered the uncertainty of life’s length as a benefit. He encourages his listeners not to delay in turning to the Lord, given especially that God mercifully keeps the last day of our death a secret, “in order that every day may be taken seriously.”¹⁵ Thus, the imminence of death and the resurrection life to come held considerable influence

¹⁰ *City of God* XXII.24, 1162.

¹¹ *City of God* XXII.24, 1164.

¹² Sermon 33A.2, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 2, 161.

¹³ Sermon 24.3-5, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 2, 74-76; Sermon 33A.2, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 2, 161. Elsewhere he likens life to a “morning breeze” in *On the Psalms* XXXVII.10, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 8, 93.

¹⁴ Sermon 301.9, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 8, 288; Sermon 229H.3, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 6, 298; Sermon 108.3 in *Works*, Part III, vol. 4, 129; *On the Psalms* XXXVII. 10, in *NPNF* First Series, vol. 8, 93.

¹⁵ Sermon 39.1, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 2, 217. See also Sermon 232.8, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 7, 29; “Letter CCXIII,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 1, 569.

over concern for the length of this life, making this life seem incomparably short.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the difficulty and brevity of life did not dampen the desire for a long life, a topic frequently addressed by Augustine.

On Long Life

Though Augustine viewed this life as short, he too acknowledged the desire for long life on this earth, even if no earthly life could be considered long when compared to the life to come. Indeed, there is a universal desire, claims Augustine, to have one's life—so long as one is pleased with it—to continue indefinitely.¹⁷ Even if this life is exceedingly difficult, Augustine acknowledges that we would happily take an indefinite extension of this earthly life.

Certainly this life is miserable enough. And yet, if this miserable life could be made eternal for us, wouldn't we just congratulate ourselves? Wouldn't we just say, "I want to be exactly as I am now, only I don't want to die?"¹⁸

Even if offered an earthly immortality where we could choose non-existence in the event that life becomes too burdensome, Augustine asserts that we would choose to remain miserable than to not exist at all.¹⁹ Yet, "no one wrongly wills immortality, if human nature is by God's gift capable of it."²⁰ Indeed, he says "all men will to be blessed, certainly, if they will truly, they will also to be immortal; for otherwise they could not be blessed."²¹ Thus, blessedness and immortality are inseparable for

¹⁶ Other Fathers echoed this sentiment. Irenaeus argued that Jesus' sacrifice was that of an 'old man,' *Against Heresies* II.22. By the fourth century, several writings suggest that fifty is considered old. Greer, "Special Gift and Special Burden," 23, notes that Gregory of Nyssa, Paulinus of Nola, and Prudentius considered themselves old at fifty. Basil the Great who likely died before fifty, also considered himself "burdened with old age." Lactantius considered the Epicureans foolish for wanting to live to one hundred, given that required an 'immortal' kind of strength. *On the Workmanship of God Or The Formation of Man* 4. Cyprian saw diminishing life spans as part of a world that was slowly decaying in accordance to God's law, *An Address to Demetrianus* 3. Gregory of Nyssa taught that life is short and that human strength was insubstantial, thus urging his followers to live for the future life, given the shortness of this present one, *The Great Catechism* 1, 5, 13, 40.

¹⁷ *On the Trinity* XIII.7.10, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 3, 172.

¹⁸ Sermon 229H.3, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 6, 298. See also Sermon 297.8, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 8, 220.

¹⁹ *City of God* XI.27, 485.

²⁰ *On the Trinity* XIII.8.11, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 3, 173. Also, *City of God* XIV.25, 628.

²¹ *On the Trinity* XIII.8.11, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 3, 172.

Augustine. Since a man cannot attain earthly immortality, it is impossible to be blessed or happy in this life. Such a man *cannot* be happy, because he cannot live *as long as he wishes*. “In what way does he live as he wishes, then, when he does not live as long as he wishes?”²²

Augustine reasons that true happiness or ‘blessedness’ consists in obtaining what one wills when one wills the right thing—the right kind of immortality. Conversely, Augustine the ‘wretched’ either attain what they wrongly will or have not attained what they rightly will.²³ Either we are wretched because we will earthly immortality, or we are wretched in not having obtained the right kind of immortality. In the first instance the one who wishes to have his body “safe and sound . . . within his own control, or even to have it with an imperishableness of the body itself” is to be pitied, because this is unattainable.²⁴ Yet, Augustine that one may be “without absurdity” be *called* happy, even though true happiness is only available in the next life.²⁵ Bonnie Kent rightly observes, “Augustine never reduces the present life to some miserable waystation on the train route to heaven.”²⁶

A large part of the desire to prolong earthly life indefinitely, no matter how miserable, says Augustine, is the universal fear of death. Indeed, “nature flees non-existence.”²⁷ Our nature desires to be “free from death, error, and harm,” and to be free from these continually.²⁸ There is something so pleasant to ‘mere existence’ that even the miserable don’t want to die. Even those who are in desperate situations and long for a hasty death actually recoil at death’s visitation, says Augustine.²⁹ Yet,

²² *City of God* XIV.25, 628.

²³ *On the Trinity* XIII.5-7, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 3, 170-171.

²⁴ *On the Trinity* XIII.7.10, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 3, 172.

²⁵ *On the Trinity* XIII.7.10, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 3, 172; *City of God* XIX.20, 949-950. Augustine arrived at this view gradually, having initially wrote that happiness was attainable in this life in *The Happy Life*. See John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 48-53, 169.

²⁶ Bonnie Kent, “Augustine’s Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 211.

²⁷ *City of God* XI.27, 485; Sermon 297.3, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 8, 297.

²⁸ *City of God* XIV.25, 628.

²⁹ Sermon 84.1, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 3, 388-389.

even when one escapes death, says Augustine, “it only means you’ve been given an extra day; you have lived one day more, you’ve got one less left, by my reckoning.”³⁰ Yet, a longer life means more opportunities for sin. This theme is a common element in the ‘consolatory’ literature of the Fathers, where a premature death is spoken of as God’s gracious foreclosure of a life otherwise irrevocably headed toward horrific evil, apostasy, and sin.³¹ Augustine too held that given the sin-affected and contingent nature of this life, it is better to die than survive and fear innumerable potential deaths.

And when, under the daily contingencies of this life, every mortal man is, so to speak, threatened with innumerable deaths, and it is uncertain which one of them will overtake him, is it, I ask, better to suffer one and die, or to live and fear them all?³²

However, Augustine is not exhorting his listeners to despise life, but rather to live life in such a way that sin doesn’t increase. “We are not blaming anyone, not finding fault, even if this life is loved. But at least let this life be loved in such a way that for love of it you don’t commit sin.”³³

Some of Augustine’s more insightful sermons underscoring his views on the nature of life and the desire for longevity come from his exposition on Psalm 34: “Who is the person who desires life, and loves to see good days? Curb your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn aside from evil, and do good; seek peace, and attend on her.”³⁴ Augustine acknowledges the rhetorical force of the psalmist’s question, yet concludes that the desire for ‘life’ and for ‘good days’ are referring to the *next* life. ‘Good days’ represent “life without end, rest without toil.”³⁵ According to Augustine, the psalmist

³⁰ Sermon 229H.2, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 6, 296-297.

³¹ Examples include Gregory of Nyssa, *On Infant’s Early Deaths* and Chrysostom’s *Letter To A Young Widow*.

³² *City of God* I.11, 19.

³³ Sermon 297.4, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 8, 217; Sermon 229H.2, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 6, 296; *City of God* I.11, 19.

³⁴ Psalm 34:12-14. Hill’s translation of Augustine’s Latin. See also Sermon 16.1, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 1, 342, Sermon 25.5, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 2, 84-85, Sermon 108.4, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 4, 129, and Sermon 297.4, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 8, 217-218.

³⁵ Sermon 108.6, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 8, 130; Sermon 346C.2, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 10, 85.

would not have said about that other life [e.g. eternal life] ‘Who is the person who desires life?’ and at the same time exhorted us to retain and prolong this one by the instructions that follow—although who does not desire this one?³⁶

This conclusion from is influenced by verse 14, where ‘attending on peace’ is taken as a *promise* rather than a command.³⁷ Given that earthly life is troublesome, he reasons that the peace of which the psalmist speaks can only mean the peace of God’s presence in eternity.³⁸ Secondly, Augustine concludes that the ‘life’ and ‘good days’ of which the psalmist speaks are descriptors of life in heaven because the command curb one’s tongue from evil and speaking deceit (v. 14) will not necessarily prolong one’s earthly life. Indeed, in some instances following these precepts may actually *hasten* death.³⁹ Thus the real problem is that people are in search of good days where they are not to be found, and that people are unwilling to live their lives in such a way that they might be found.⁴⁰

While Augustine concedes that it is possible to live a morally good and long life, he is quick to temper any desire for a longer earthly life by reminding his listeners just how short this life is. A short good life is better than a long, bad one. Moreover, a well-lived life results in diminished concern for the length of earthly life.

You are certainly eager for it to be a long one, even if it’s a bad one. Much better to make it a good one, and not be afraid of its being a short one. You see, if you take care to lead it well, you won’t care at all about its soon coming to an end. It will, after all, be followed by eternal life . . .⁴¹

For Augustine, longevity is a thoroughly moral question. Augustine exhorts his listeners to pursue a *good* life should they entertain any hopes of having a *long* life on this earth. It is clear however, that seeking out the morally good life is the first priority. Our efforts are better spent in securing those good days that will be without

³⁶ Sermon 16.1, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 1, 342.

³⁷ Sermon 16.1, 345 n.2; *On the Psalms* XXXIV.14, 19, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 8, 77.

³⁸ Sermon 16.1, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 1, 342.

³⁹ Sermon 16.3, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 1, 343-344.

⁴⁰ Sermon 297.9, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 8, 221.

⁴¹ Sermon 16.2, 3 in *Works*, Part III, vol. 1, 343.

toil.⁴² Though days without toil can be secured by pursuing a morally good life, Augustine did speak of prolonging earthly life as well.

On Extending Earthly Life

Augustine's thoughts on life extension were heavily influenced by the nature of earthly life. Given the difficulty of this life, extending it was considered nothing more than 'death postponement.' In his *City of God*, Augustine offers a Stoic-like indifference to the length of life:

I know this: that no one has ever died who had not been going to die eventually. The end of life makes a long life the same as a short one; for the one is not better and the other worse, and the one is not greater and the other lesser, when both no longer exist.⁴³

This indifference does not come from the finality of death and permanent non-existence. Augustine fully acknowledges the reality of death, but not its finality. Death is not an evil when preceded by a good life—no, death is made evil by what *follows* death.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Augustine acknowledged that it is so easy to become engrossed in this life, so concerned with daily activities, that we long to put death off as long as possible.⁴⁵ However, while great measures are taken to put off death and live a little longer, there is no way to put it off death indefinitely. "Nothing can be done to put death away for good, and everything possible is done to put it off for a time."⁴⁶

Again, Augustine urges his listeners to compare this present life with the life to come, chiding his listeners for heavy expenditures in attempts to secure a few more days on earth.

⁴² Sermon 108.6, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 4, 131.

⁴³ I.11, 19.

⁴⁴ *City of God* I.11, 19.

⁴⁵ Sermon 108.4, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 4, 130; Sermon 302.5, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 8, 302-303; *City of God* XI.27, 485.

⁴⁶ Sermon 280.3, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 8, 73; see also Sermon 77A.4, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 3, 329; Sermon 84.1, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 3, 388; Sermon 127.2, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 4, 282; Sermon 344.3, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 10, 51.

From your temporal life, which you redeem at such a vast price, in order to live a few days more . . . calculate how much the eternal life you neglect is worth. . . . So you are redeeming just a few days, and these so painfully laborious, lived in such want, amid such trials? How much for?⁴⁷

From the vantage point of eternity with Christ, living a little longer on this earth is nothing when faced with the prospect of living forever. A ceaseless striving to prolong earthly life was misguided, given the blessings of the life to come.

Our efforts are better spent, says Augustine, in securing *eternal* life. “If we spend all that labor on merely dying a bit later,” asks Augustine, “how much should be spent on never dying at all?”⁴⁸ Augustine did not, however, deny that the pathway to the next life involved experiencing one’s own bodily failure leading to death. The first death, the death of the body that inspires fear in one’s soul “is to be counted among the things to be put up with, and among the things to be tolerated and endured patiently.”⁴⁹ Though we wrestle with the idea of our own death, it is not to be feared. Rather, the second, everlasting death is the one we ought to fear.⁵⁰ Though the first death was of penultimate concern for Augustine, he urged his listeners to look to Christ in coming to terms with the first death. We have Christ’s example in Gethsemane in helping us to overcome our fear of death. Christ’s crucifixion impresses upon us a “proper disregard for this life.”⁵¹ By his own suffering Christ shows us that *this* life is troublesome, grief-ridden and therefore must run its course. Jesus says to us,

O humanity, why were you afraid of dying? Look, I die; look, I suffer; so there, you shouldn’t fear what you were afraid of, because I am showing you what to hope for.⁵²

Augustine concludes that those who are unwilling to ‘despise a few days of life’ in order to attain that everlasting day have never taken up their crosses to follow the

⁴⁷ Sermon 345.2, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 10, 60.

⁴⁸ Sermon 359A.8, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 10, 215; Sermon 127.2, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 4, 282.

⁴⁹ Sermon 359A.8, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 10, 215; Sermon 302.4, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 4, 302.

⁵⁰ Sermon 77A.4, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 3, 330.

⁵¹ Sermon 335H.1, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 9, 246.

⁵² Sermon 229H.3, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 6, 297.

Lord.⁵³ Since the way of the cross is marked by love, he encourages his listeners to ‘change their kind of love,’ to cease loving life so much that any death becomes repugnant to one’s sensibilities, and to love Christ more.

Certainly, you don’t want to die. Change your kind of love, and you will be shown, not a death that will present itself to you against your will, but a death which will, if you so will, absent itself altogether.⁵⁴

If Christ’s crucifixion reminds us of the sorrows and sufferings in this life, his resurrection and ascension remind us of what to hope for. Christians place their hope in the One who has gone before, having suffered and conquered death himself, that we might be united with him in our own resurrection bodies.⁵⁵

Augustine’s near indifference concerning the length of life and extending it were nearly always placed within the context of eternal life presupposed by the general resurrection. Thus, the possibility of putting off death for a few more days on this earth was considered foolish when one might gain days that do not end. Indeed, eternal life with Christ is such a dominant theme with Augustine, that it occasionally skews his interpretation of Old Testament texts written in a context where the dead were thought to dwell in *sheol*, in a shadowy, pseudo-existence, cut off from God and his people. Though Augustine acknowledged the goodness of embodiment and the pleasures of life, he also held that a longer life on earth meant an extended struggle against sin. While the length of life appears somewhat relativized in light of New Testament hope for resurrection, it is not so insubstantial as to render a desire for long life as superfluous. Augustine was concerned that we seek the right kind of immortality, which entails following the example of Christ who overcame the fear of death and was willing to die. In addition to the weight of eternity, one suspects that his conception of sin and the profound effects of the fall only contributed to his dim appraisal of earthly life and hopes for extending it. That Adam’s sin introduced both physical and spiritual death into the created order, including humanity’s mysterious corporeal participation in Adam’s sin, may have influenced Augustine in this regard. While Augustine’s later works appear to have shaken off any Manichean residue, he

⁵³ Sermon 344.5, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 10, 54.

⁵⁴ Sermon 344.3, in *Works*, Part III, vol. 10, 51.

⁵⁵ Augustine, Letter CXVIII.3.14, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 1, 443.

retained a strong sense that embodied life will always involve a profound struggle with sin.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Aquinas considers life from both philosophical (metaphysical) and theological perspectives, viewing revelation as that which crowns what can be gained from nature. Metaphysically, relies heavily on Aristotle in defining life and human personhood as the unity of the physical body and the rational, immaterial soul.⁵⁶ In this sense life “is the very existence of a living thing, which results from a soul untied to a body as form.”⁵⁷ Thus, it is ‘contrary to nature’ for the soul to be without a body.⁵⁸ Following Aristotle, Aquinas states that the soul moves or operates (*operatur*) the heart, infusing life into it, which in turn gives life to all other parts of the human body.⁵⁹ Unlike the body, the soul as an intellectual and immaterial substance “is not weakened . . . by old age or any other bodily weakness.”⁶⁰ Though our flesh dies, the soul remains immortal.⁶¹ Given this basic relationship between body and soul, Aquinas speaks of death as both the privation of life (*privatio vitae*)⁶² and the separation of body and soul (*separatio animae a corpore*).⁶³

There is however another sense in which humans alone possess a degree of life that other living things do not.⁶⁴ In his *Commentary on St. John*, Aquinas bases these

⁵⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* [Hereafter *ST*] IIIa, q. 16, art. 1, *ad* 1.

⁵⁷ *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* XIII.4. *ad* 2, quoted in Jason T. Eberl, “A Thomistic Understanding of Human Death,” *Bioethics* 19 (2005): 31. See also *ST* Ia, q. 76.

⁵⁸ *Summa Contra Gentiles* [Hereafter *SCG*] II, 68, 79, 83.

⁵⁹ *Questions on the Soul* [Quaestiones de Anima] IX *ad* 13, trans. James H. Robb (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1984). See also *Questions on the Soul* X. *ad* 4, X. *ad* 11, XI *ad* 16. Aquinas of course differs from Aristotle over the separability and survival of the rational soul apart from the body at death. See Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima*, Book II, Lec. 2, no. 242, trans. Kenelm Foster and Silvester Humphries (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Press, 1951), 79.

⁶⁰ *SCG* II, 79.10.

⁶¹ *SCG* IV, 55.17.

⁶² *Questions on the Soul* XIV. 8; *ST* IIaIIae, q. 164. art. 1, *ad* 8; *ST* III, q. 53, art. 1, *ad* 1.

⁶³ *Questions on the Soul* VIII.4.

⁶⁴ *ST* Ia, q. 18, art. 2, *ad* 1; *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* 1:4b; 5:21, trans. James A. Weisheipl and Fabian R. Larcher (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1980), nos. 97 and 771, 59 and 310 respectively. Following Aristotle, there are four levels of life: plant life, which is sensate, animal life

gradations of life on the knowledge of the Word who is life and the light of men (John 1:4). As such, all creaturely life exists with lesser degrees of light. Unlike plants, animals, and other living things, only human beings have the light of men, “who live, and know, not only truths, but also the very nature of truth itself.”⁶⁵

Intellect separates humans from all other living creatures. Thus,

intellectual life is the first and foremost life, which is the spiritual life, that is immediately received from the first principle of life, whence it is called the life of wisdom. . . . we share life from Christ, who is the Wisdom of God, insofar as our soul receives wisdom from him.⁶⁶

Thus, while life in one sense is “nothing else than to exist in this or that nature,”⁶⁷ life in another sense is any activity into which one throws oneself so that one’s whole being is ‘bent’ towards it. The highest form of life involves the contemplation God (*vita contemplativa*) and knowing Him, a life Aquinas describes as ‘life eternal’ (*vita aeterna*).⁶⁸ Here, ‘life eternal’ speaks not only of God’s life, but also of the ultimate perfection of human life.⁶⁹

The end of this spiritual life is happiness, an end to which all humans naturally aspire,⁷⁰ yet can only be obtained by knowing and loving God.⁷¹ Such happiness has been appropriately described as “human flourishing, well-being, or happiness *in*

involving only sensation, sensate animal life capable of movement, and intellectual life, the life of human beings.

⁶⁵ *Commentary on John* 1:4b, no. 97, 59. Carlo Leget expands on this theme in “The Concept of ‘Life’ in the *Commentary on St. John*,” in *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology*, ed. Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 154. See also Carlo Leget, *Living with God: Thomas Aquinas on the Relation between Life on Earth and ‘Life’ after Death* (Louvain: Peeters, 1997).

⁶⁶ *Commentary on John* 5:21, no. 771, 310.

⁶⁷ *ST* Ia, q. 18, art. 2, relying on Aristotle’s *De anima* II.7 (415b13): “vivere autem viventibus est esse.”

⁶⁸ *ST* Ia, q. 18, art. 2, *ad* 2; *ST* Ia, q. 18, art. 3 and 4. Aquinas also notes that man is gradually made like God and other holy spirits in the pursuit of the vision of God, *Commentary on John* 3:3, no. 432, 184.

⁶⁹ Carlo Leget, *Living with God*, 260.

⁷⁰ *ST* IaIIae, q. 2, art. 7; *ST* IaIIae, q. 2, art. 8; *ST* IaIIae, q. 5, art. 8. “Consequently to desire happiness is nothing else than to desire that one’s will be satisfied. And this everyone desires.” See also *SCG* III, 59.1, where Aquinas asserts that “the vision of the divine substance is the ultimate end of every intellectual substance [e.g. man].”

⁷¹ *SCG* IV, 92.4. Aquinas is relying on a Latin translation of Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, ch. 5, which renders εὐδαιμόνιαν as *felicitas*.

union with God.”⁷² Following Aristotle, Aquinas states that *beatitudo imperfecta* or *felicitas* is an activity of the soul in accordance with complete virtue.⁷³ On account of sin and man’s perverted will however, God cannot be properly apprehended in this life.⁷⁴ As such, happiness can only be imperfect (*beatitudo imperfecta*) before our glorification.⁷⁵ While the contemplation of truth begins in this life, it can only reach its fulfillment in the next, where one attains ultimate happiness (*beatitudo perfecta*) in beholding God’s Divine Essence (1 John 3:2), a happiness enjoyed by the saints in heaven (1 Corinthians 2:9).⁷⁶

Aquinas explicitly rejects the claim that man’s happiness consists in the pleasures of the body or soul, or any created good.⁷⁷ Though some animals surpass man in bodily good—elephants in longevity and lions in strength—Aquinas asserts that the final end of a thing is not its preservation.⁷⁸ As a captain does not intend the preservation of his ship as its highest end (but rather navigation), so man must employ his will and reason (Ecclesiasticus 15:14) to an end higher than mere bodily preservation. Nevertheless, the end of man’s will and reason *entails* the preservation of man’s being—body and soul—where the well-being of the body depends on the well being of the soul.⁷⁹ Bodily good adds a certain charm to and perfection to happiness; ultimately, the perfect disposition of the body is *required* for perfect happiness.⁸⁰ Given however the nature of happiness and its ultimate fulfillment in God’s presence, Aquinas resolutely concludes that happiness is not attainable in this life; evils of both body and soul abound.

⁷² Brian Davies, *Aquinas* (London: Continuum, 2002), 159.

⁷³ *ST* Ia, q. 75, art. 6; *ST* Ia, q. 89, art. 1-2; *SCG* II, 50, 55, 79. For Aquinas, the cardinal virtues are ‘crowned’ by the God-empowered pursuit of the *theological* virtues of faith, hope, and love. *ST* IaIIae, q. 62, art. 1.

⁷⁴ *SCG* III, 48; IV, 92.7.

⁷⁵ *ST* Ia, q. 93, art. 4; see Leget, *Living with God*, 148 ff.

⁷⁶ *ST* IaIIae, q. 180, art. 5; *ST* IaIIae, q. 3, art. 8; q. 5, art. 5; see also *ST* IaIIae, q. 1, art. 8; *SCG* III, 48, 63; *SCG* IV, 79.11.

⁷⁷ *SCG* III, 26-37; *SCG* IV, 92.4.

⁷⁸ *ST* IaIIae, q. 2, art. 5.

⁷⁹ *ST* Ia, q. 76, art. 1; *ST* IaIIae, q. 4, art. 5, 6; *ST* IaIIae, q. 2, art. 5; *SCG* II, 69-71.

⁸⁰ *ST* IaIIae, q. 4, art. 6; *SCG* II, 81.12. Perfection of the body—a spiritual body that will not ‘weigh down’ one’s soul—is necessary for the apprehension of the Divine Essence, lest the imperfect body in some way hinder this vision.

Of course, it is not possible for man in the present state of life to be entirely free from evils, not only from corporeal ones, such as hunger, thirst, heat and cold, and other things of this kind, but also from evils of the soul. . . . Therefore, no person is happy in this life.⁸¹

Because this life offers no stability, and ultimate happiness means fulfillment, man cannot be happy, for such desire is not yet at rest.⁸² Moreover, given that our time on earth is exceedingly short when viewed against eternity, Aquinas asserts that it would be “inappropriate and irrational” for the development of happiness *in life* to be longer than the period of happiness’ perfection in eternity. Finally, since there is no freedom from death in this life, it is impossible to be happy here on earth. Ultimately, *beatitudo perfecta* is impossible in this life as all human existence is marked by death, a topic on which Aquinas has much to say.

On Death

Unquestionably, Aquinas considers death as *privatio vitae* as an evil (*malum*), since bodily death extinguishes the means by which one obtains other goods in life. Indeed, corporeal death is to be most feared as it deprives us of all other natural goods.⁸³ While the soul exists apart from the body after death, Aquinas notes that this is contrary to its nature.⁸⁴ Thus, Aquinas states on the one hand that he is not his soul (*anima mea non est ego*).⁸⁵ On the other hand, he states that the soul is imperfect as long as it is separated from the body.⁸⁶ These are held in tension by the resurrection.⁸⁷

⁸¹ SCG III, 48.5; 48.8.

⁸² SCG III, 48.3.

⁸³ ST IIaIIae, q. 123, art. 4.

⁸⁴ *Commentary by Saint Thomas Aquinas on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 15:19, no. 924, trans. Fabian R. Larcher and Daniel Keating, <http://www.aquinas.avemaria.edu/Aquinas-Corinthians.pdf>. See also ST Ia, q. 75, art. 4.

⁸⁵ *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 15:19, no. 924.

⁸⁶ *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 15:19, no. 924.

⁸⁷ SCG IV, 79.10-12; SCG IV, 82.

Though Aquinas speaks of death understood as the separation of body and soul as a natural occurrence, death is ultimately a result of sin. Adam's sin resulted in God removing his preternatural gift of grace whereby Adam's relationship to God and his relationship between the soul and body were disordered, his soul losing its intimate relationship to God, thereby surrendering its rational control of the body.⁸⁸ The soul's preserving power against natural bodily corruption was forfeited as Adam's soul abandoned communion with God.⁸⁹ Sin then disrupts the order of body and soul: the rational part of the soul no longer controls and retards the body's corruption, losing its power over the lower parts of the soul (e.g. the irascible soul).⁹⁰ Additionally, Adam was denied further access to the tree of life as a second cause of immortality whereby the gradual diminishment of active bodily power (aging) could otherwise be replenished,⁹¹ as "it was not expedient for man to remain longer in the unhappiness of this life."⁹² Due to the 'exigencies of matter' by which a body tends towards decay—a condition whose remedy has been removed on account of original sin—the decaying body eventually becomes unsuitable for the immortal soul.⁹³ Thus, Aquinas could speak of bodily death from old age as a death "from natural causes."⁹⁴ Like Augustine, Aquinas affirms that Adam was potentially immortal before he sinned, after which death was introduced into the created order (Romans 5:12).⁹⁵ Thus, for Aquinas, physical death and all bodily defects are both the result of God's removal of His gift and punishments for it; privation is punishment (Genesis 3:19).⁹⁶ Adam and Eve not only suffer the punishment of death, but are also punished in being *reminded* of their coming death.⁹⁷ Original sin then has left humanity with no remedy for the corruption natural to the body, and ensuing physical death.

⁸⁸ *ST* Ia, q. 97, art. 1; *ST* Ia, q. 95, art. 1; *ST* IaIIae, q. 82, art. 1, 3; *ST* IIaIIae, q. 163, art.1, q. 164, art. 2; *SCG* IV, 81.1-3.

⁸⁹ *ST* Ia, q. 97, art. 1.

⁹⁰ *ST* IIaIIae, q. 164, art. 1-2.

⁹¹ *ST* Ia, q. 97, art. 4.

⁹² *ST* IIaIIae, q. 164, art. 2, *ad* 6.

⁹³ *Questions on the Soul* VIII *ad* 9, XIV *ad* 13, *ad* 20. In his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 15:44a, no. 988, Aquinas lists four ways in which the soul operates on the body: (1) it gives existence, (2) conserves from corruption, (3) gives beauty and clarity, and (4) gives movement.

⁹⁴ *ST* Ia, q. 97, art. 4. Aquinas follows Augustine, *City of God* XIV.26.

⁹⁵ *ST* Ia, q. 97, art. 1; *ST* IIaIIae, q. 164, art. 1; *SCG* IV, 79.1.

⁹⁶ *ST* IaIIae, q. 85, art. 6; Aquinas *ST* Supp., q. 78, art. 2.

⁹⁷ *ST* IIaIIae, q. 164, art. 2.

As bad as corporeal death is however, the greater evil is spiritual death, the ‘second death’ of damnation, the eternal separation of the soul from God.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, for Aquinas all death is evil (*malum*). Unlike Ambrose, Aquinas would never entitle a treatise *de bono mortis*.⁹⁹ Given the nature of death as *malum*, we naturally shrink from it, says Aquinas, doing our utmost to avoid it.¹⁰⁰ Like Augustine, Aquinas recognized that “man naturally desires to exist forever.”¹⁰¹ That is, “we prefer that the soul attain to glory without the body’s being dissolved by death,” for the soul’s natural desire is to remain united with the body (2 Corinthians 5:4).¹⁰²

We moan and moan like doves (Is. 59:11), because it is hard to think of death, and yet burdened as with something against our desire, in that we cannot attain to glory without the putting off of the body. This is so much against our natural desire that, as Augustine says, not even old age itself could remove the fear of death from Peter.¹⁰³

In addition to the *natural* desire to avoid physiological suffering and death is the *supernatural* desire for a heavenly dwelling (2 Corinthians 5:10), implanted in man by God’s Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁴ There are thus two ‘contrary’ desires in holy men: the desire for a heavenly dwelling and at the same time a wish not “to be despoiled.”¹⁰⁵

Yet, death allows for the development of fortitude (*fortitudo*). Following Aristotle, Aquinas asserts that *fortitudo* is a cardinal virtue related to the fear of death stemming from the sensitive part of the soul whereby one sets aside the natural fear of death and willingly endures the pain and affliction of death.¹⁰⁶ However, Aquinas further qualifies *fortitudo* with the Christian virtues of faith (*fides*) and love (*caritas*),

⁹⁸ *ST Supp.* q. 75, art. 1, *ad* 5. Hence, the term ‘mortal sin.’ See also *SCG* III, 141.4.

⁹⁹ Leget, *Living with God*, 266.

¹⁰⁰ *SCG* III, 48.6.

¹⁰¹ *SCG* II, 79.6.

¹⁰² Aquinas, *Commentary by Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* 5:3, no. 159, trans. Fabian R. Larcher. <http://www.aquinas.avemaria.edu/Aquinas-Corinthians-Sec2.pdf>.

¹⁰³ *Commentary on 2 Corinthians* 5:4, no. 159.

¹⁰⁴ *Commentary on 2 Corinthians* 5:5, no. 161.

¹⁰⁵ *Commentary on 2 Corinthians* 5:6, no. 162.

¹⁰⁶ *ST IIaIIae*, q. 123, art. 3, following Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, ch.7; Book III, ch. 9. See also *ST IIaIIae*, q. 124, art. 3.

seeing its highest form in martyrdom.¹⁰⁷ Thus, the mere endurance of death itself is not necessarily praiseworthy. Fortitude motivated by *charity* however is an act and bond of perfection (Colossians 3:14).¹⁰⁸ Charity is evident when one foregoes what one loves most, life, in order to suffer what one fears most—death accompanied by bodily torment.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, “the will of God is for virtue by which a man bears death bravely, and in charity exposes himself to the dangers of death.”¹¹⁰ Thus,

A martyr is a witness to the Christian faith, which teaches us to despise things visible for the sake of things invisible For men are wont to despise both their kindred and all they possess, and even to suffer bodily pain rather than lose life.”¹¹¹

In light of Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 5:8, ‘we are of good courage,’ we are to willingly involve ourselves in the dangers of death without yielding to fear, for it is preferable to be in the presence of the Lord. Though the saints naturally fear death, “yet they dare to face the dangers of death and not yield because of a fear of death.”¹¹² Though the fear of death springs from nature’s desire, good courage springs from grace’s desire; therefore, ‘we are of good courage.’ Our supreme model is Jesus Christ. Because God willingly took on frail human flesh, we are more strengthened in our own hope for immortality.¹¹³ Christ’s resurrection assures us of this fact, enabling us to expose ourselves to tribulation and affliction.

Aquinas is in general agreement with Augustine in both asserting that Adam’s sin introduced death into the created order and acknowledging that it is natural to shrink from death and to wish for a longer life. Moreover, the weight of eternity bears heavily upon the nature and length of earthly life, not so much because eternity is infinitely longer, but because perfect happiness cannot be secured on this earth. While Aquinas recognizes the difficult nature of life, he emphasizes that our natural

¹⁰⁷ *ST IIaIIae*, q. 123, art. 3; q. 124, art. 4.

¹⁰⁸ *ST IIaIIae*, q. 124, art. 3. See also *ST IIaIIae*, q. 124, art. 4 *ad* 4.

¹⁰⁹ *ST IIaIIae*, q. 124, art. 3. Aquinas notes that some do not fear death as such, but rather the possibility of an ignominious death like that of Christ on the cross, *SCG IV*, 55.20.

¹¹⁰ *SCG IV*, 55.18.

¹¹¹ *ST IIaIIae*, q. 124, art. 4.

¹¹² *Commentary on 2 Corinthians* 5:8, no. 163.

¹¹³ *SCG IV*, 55.14.

fear of death is justified, as death is unquestionably *malum*. Though the fear of death encourages thoughts of bodily preservation, preservation itself is not the highest end for which we were created. Rather, we are to use the fear of death as fuel for the development of fortitude, whose supreme example we find in Jesus Christ who succumbed to bodily death and was resurrected with a glorified body. So too the Christian can look forward to beholding God with a glorified body and soul in perfect *beatitudo* which makes this life incomparably short.

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Unlike Aquinas, Luther's writings on the nature and length of life are less metaphysical and more existential in nature, spotted with occasional hyperbolic outbursts. He was familiar with suffering, having witnessed the death of two children and having experienced numerous health issues. Luther often spoke of life and death, of goodness and evil, of joy and sorrow as nearly indistinguishable. Indeed, it was faith's clear vision that enabled one to see how inextricably related these are.

Thus faith clearly sees how close together good fortune and misfortune really are. Just so life and death are closely conjoined, so that life is in death, and the two could not be any closer, nay they are actually one thing. Thus misfortune lurks in the greatest good fortune and in poverty and misery lurk wealth, joy, and delight.¹¹⁴

Thus, we do well to remember that "God has loaded him [man] with a little of the sweat with which He burdened Adam."¹¹⁵ These statements reflect the ambivalence with which Luther spoke of life, though he readily speaks of the sorrows of earthly life.

Life is sorrowful in part because we are under God's judgment. Luther asserted that the psalmist's request to number our days aright (Psalm 90) is not a request for God to reveal the exact number of our days,¹¹⁶ but to ensure that we not "falsely project

¹¹⁴ Martin Luther, in *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, comp. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 782.

¹¹⁵ *What Luther Says*, 782; *Lectures on Genesis* 3:19, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 1 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 214 [hereafter *LW* 1].

¹¹⁶ *Commentary on the Psalms* 90:12, in *LW* 13, 129. This would appear to be the request of the psalmist in Psalm 39:4-7 RSV, though here too the idea points to a recognition and acceptance of

ourselves an endless number of years.”¹¹⁷ But Luther also understood that this psalm serves as a prescription to recognize the brevity of our difficult existence and the immanence of death under God’s impending wrath: “we should consider how miserable and brief our life really is because of death and God’s eternal wrath, which threatens us every passing moment.”¹¹⁸ As such, Luther was not particularly concerned about the accuracy of seventy or eighty years, noting that “just as Moses set down as a general limit seventy years, so we set down for our day forty or fifty years.”¹¹⁹ Interestingly, Luther attributed the considerably reduced life span of Moses’ time compared to that of ‘the ancients’ to “intemperance in eating and drinking,”¹²⁰ leading him to conclude that “we could probably also attain that same age [as Moses] if we were to control the body by practicing the same degree of moderation.”¹²¹ Thus, Luther recognized a link between moral behavior and longevity, suggesting that our eating habits have somehow incurred the wrath of God.

Ironically, Luther asserted that the ignorance of God’s wrath makes the heathen’s life more enjoyable than the Christian’s, for they think their own death “is not unlike that of a cow.”¹²² Christians, however, are ‘especially wretched’ and suffer more misery

life’s brevity: “LORD, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is!”

¹¹⁷ *Commentary on the Psalms* 90:12, in *LW* 13, 128. Luther’s own translation captures the meaning well: “Lehre uns bedenken, daß wir sterben müssen, auf daß wir klug werden,” “Teach us to remember that we must die, that we may become wise,” quoted in Karl Barth, “Teach Us to Number Our Days,” in *Deliverance to the Captives*, trans. Marguerite Wieser (London: SCM Press, 1961), 118. See also Eberhard Jüngel, *Death: The Riddle and The Mystery*, trans. I. Nicole and U. Nicole (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), 54. See also Calvin, *Commentary upon the Book of Psalms*, vol. III, 473.

¹¹⁸ *Commentary on the Psalms* 90:12, in *LW* 13, 129.

¹¹⁹ Luther, *Commentary on the Psalms* 90:10, in *LW* 13, 122. Luther unwittingly asserts that any life exceeding this point “does not deserve to be called ‘life,’ since all things most essential to life are then absent,” *Commentary on the Psalms* 90:10, in *LW* 13, 120.

¹²⁰ Luther, *Commentary on the Psalms* 90:10, in *LW* 13, 122. A similar theme is found in Jubilees 23:8-15, where humans after the flood began to “grow old quickly and to shorten the days of their lives due to much suffering and through the evil of their ways,” *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, trans. O. S. Wintermute, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 100.

¹²¹ Luther, *Commentary on the Psalms* 90:10, in *LW* 13, 121.

¹²² *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 15:19, in *LW* 28, 103. See also *The Three Creeds or Symbols of the Christian Faith*, in *LW* 34, 210.

given the fear of future judgment and the fire of Hell.¹²³ Thus, Luther concludes that life is ‘madness:’

Great is the misery of human life. Nothing were better than a blessed death [*ein gut Stündlein*], to pass away and let the world have its heartache. . . . In short, human life is madness. When children, we were troubled by childish complaints; when young men, we were dying of love; when old men, we become worse, that is, we turn into misers and worshippers of mammon.¹²⁴

Luther’s letters to his friends in his latter life reveal his struggles with aging, bodily disease and decay, which considerably diminished both his enjoyment of life and concern over its length, making the prospect of a resurrected body all the more attractive. In reply to a eulogium of an additional forty years of life, Luther replied:

God forbid! Even if God were to offer me paradise in order that I might last forty more years in this life, I wouldn’t want it. I’d rather hire a hangman to knock my head off.¹²⁵

Luther readily concedes that it is better to have a brief life with good health than a long life with poor health.¹²⁶ As his bodily ailments accumulated, he declared that he “desired to live no longer,”¹²⁷ occasionally referring to himself as “more dead than alive,” asking for a peaceful passing from this world.¹²⁸ Just two years before his death, Luther tells confidant James Propst, “I have lived long enough, if one may call it living,” that he feels like a “useless old man,” and that the time had come for his body to be “handed over to decomposition and the worms.”¹²⁹ He read Ecclesiastes

¹²³ *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 15:19, in *LW* 28, 103.

¹²⁴ *What Luther Says*, 782-783, 784.

¹²⁵ *Table Talk*, *LW* 54, 359.

¹²⁶ *The Estate of Marriage*, in *LW* 45, 46.

¹²⁷ *Table Talk* DCCLXXXIX, trans. William Hazlitt (London: George Bell and Sons, 1909), 319. Afflictions like kidney stones, gout, hemorrhoids and high blood pressure were already taking their toll on the overweight, aging Luther. See H. G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980).

¹²⁸ “To James Propst (1544),” in *LW* 50, 241.

¹²⁹ “To James Propst (1544),” in *LW* 50, 245. Luther made similar statements to Propst about his aging body several years earlier, *LW* 50, 181-184.

12 as a commentary on “decrepit and useless old age.”¹³⁰ Indeed, Luther likened aging itself to a disease.¹³¹

Interestingly, Luther links the fact that we “are old before our time” in part to God’s postlapsarian dietary provision of meat.¹³² Thus, “we hasten our death by the variety of our food and by our gluttony.”¹³³ If we ate simpler food, “we would undoubtedly enjoy a longer life.”¹³⁴ Luther charged the monks with hypocrisy for engorging themselves with food following a fast,¹³⁵ endorsing a moderation which avoided Epicureanism on one hand and extreme asceticism on the other (Colossians 2:23).¹³⁶ Yet, as he grew older, the rotund Luther resolutely refused to bother with physicians and dietary restrictions, refusing to further ‘embitter’ his life: “In God’s name I’ll eat whatever tastes good to me.”¹³⁷

If aging and bodily suffering contributed to Luther’s ambivalence regarding the length of life, so too did his view of this earth as the realm of the Devil.¹³⁸ In the face of his daughter’s (Margaret) ten-week fever, Luther declared to a friend that he would not be angry if the Lord took her “out of this satanic age and world from which I, too, desire quickly to be taken, together with all my loved ones.”¹³⁹ In his *Large Catechism*, Luther exhorts Christians to observe the Sabbath given that we are “daily in the dominion of the devil.”¹⁴⁰ In light of the resurrection however, Luther admonishes us to ‘run into Devil’s spears,’ for by doing so the Christian illustrates

¹³⁰ *Notes on Ecclesiastes* 12:5, LW 15, 181; see also 98, 117.

¹³¹ *Notes on Ecclesiastes* 12:1, LW 15, 178. See also *Lectures on Genesis* 47:10, in LW 8, 113.

¹³² *Lectures on Genesis* 34:2, in LW 6, 188. See also LW 1, 207, 342.

¹³³ *Lectures on Genesis* 11:10, in LW 2, 232.

¹³⁴ *Lectures on Genesis* 11:10, in LW 2, 231.

¹³⁵ *Sermon on Soberness and Moderation against Gluttony, 1 Pet. 4:7-11* (1539), in LW 51, 293; *Table Talk*, in LW 54, 178.

¹³⁶ *What Luther Says*, 787. See also *Lectures on Genesis* 24:24, LW 4, 277.

¹³⁷ *Table Talk*, in LW 54, 359.

¹³⁸ *Table Talk*, in LW 54, 359.

¹³⁹ “To James Propst (1544),” in LW 50, 246.

¹⁴⁰ *The Large Catechism* (1529), in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1959), 377.

the saying that the greater one's piety, the earlier is one's death. Luther reasons that "if God is to preserve a pious person to grant him a long life, a special power and might well be required, a power surpassing that of both man and devil."¹⁴¹ While Luther acknowledged that long life itself comes from obedience to God's commandments,¹⁴² he also asserted that Satan could deliberately prolong the lives of suffering saints as a way of tormenting faithful followers of Christ.¹⁴³ If this life involves suffering at the hands of Satan, it also entails a relentless battle against one's own sin. Luther draws upon the images of death and resurrection in baptism, and likens the life of the Christian to a 'spiritual baptism.'

This life is nothing else then a spiritual baptism which does not cease till death, and whoever is baptized is condemned to die; . . . for sin never entirely ceases while this body lives, which is so wholly conceived in sin that sin is in its very nature. . . . So, then, the life of a Christian, from baptism to the grave, is nothing else than the beginning of a blessed death, for at the Last Day God will make the Christian altogether new.¹⁴⁴

Though Luther appeared almost entirely indifferent to the length of one's life on account of bodily suffering, wickedness, and the perpetual battle against one's own sin, he also readily asserted that "nothing is more precious than long life,"¹⁴⁵ acknowledging that humans seek immortality.¹⁴⁶ Life and bodily health are the greatest treasures one has on this earth.¹⁴⁷ Elsewhere Luther asserts that "a man's life and the health of his organs and the proper condition of his body are gifts of God, the Creator."¹⁴⁸ In his later life Luther eventually found himself able to praise the human body.

Dear God, how wonderful Thou art in the construction of the members of the human body! The heart, the best organ and the most essential

¹⁴¹ *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 16:19, in *LW* 28, 106.

¹⁴² *Ten Sermons on the Catechism*, in *LW* 51, 150.

¹⁴³ *Lectures on Isaiah* 26:5; 35:3 in *LW* 16, 201, 301 respectively.

¹⁴⁴ Luther, *A Treatise on Baptism*, in *Works of Martin Luther: With Introduction and Notes*, vol. 1, ed. Henry E. Jacobs and Adolph Spaeth (Philadelphia, PA: A. J. Holman, 1915), 57.

¹⁴⁵ *Ten Sermons on the Catechism*, in *LW* 51, 150; *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 15:28, in *LW* 28, 103, 146.

¹⁴⁶ *Table Talk* CL, 63.

¹⁴⁷ *Ten Sermons on the Catechism*, in *LW* 51, 152.

¹⁴⁸ *What Luther Says*, 787.

part of man, is so tender, and yet we place a strain on it as though it were a wall six feet thick.¹⁴⁹

Such statements were likely informed by his emphasis on bodily resurrection in acknowledging that the soul apart from the body is deficient. Resurrection involves both body and soul.

But I want to live not only according to the soul but also according to the body. I want my body too; I want the body which I now carry about on this earth, burdened with sins, miseries, and calamities, to return to the soul and to be reunited with it.¹⁵⁰

Just as bodily suffering, wickedness and sin decreases the significance of the length of life on this earth, so too does the promise and joy of bodily resurrection, even should this earthly life span many millennia.

But the preservation of body and soul will be accomplished solely by God . . . The sight of Him will afford more life, joy, and delight than all the creatures are able to accord, and you will have to say, ‘I would not exchange one moment in heaven for all the world’s goods and pleasures, even though the latter endured thousands and thousands of years.’¹⁵¹

Thus, Christians are to use this life as a preparation for a better life after this life, for a kingdom that will not pass away, so that “their hold on this present life is not as sure as the hold they have on the life to come.”¹⁵² Any consolation we derive in this life comes from the life beyond, where “God Himself will be ours . . . who is the life and an inexhaustible depth of everything good and of eternal joy.”¹⁵³

The resurrection to come is so wonderful that Luther can speak of death as ‘sleep,’ while largely affirming the relationship between sin and death as expounded by Augustine. Christ’s death is the only ‘real death’ that has devoured all other deaths and is therefore the standard against which all other death is to be compared. Death

¹⁴⁹ *What Luther Says*, 786-787.

¹⁵⁰ *What Luther Says*, 779.

¹⁵¹ *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 15:24, in *LW* 28, 125.

¹⁵² *What Luther Says*, 784; *LW* 30, 213.

¹⁵³ *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 15:28, in *LW* 28, 146.

itself has been defeated by Christ's resurrection, making our death a 'sleep.'¹⁵⁴ In his funeral sermon for Duke John of Saxony, Luther asserts that those Christians who have died "should not be called dead people but sleeping and henceforth death should not be called death but a sleep, and such a deep sleep that one will not even dream."¹⁵⁵ The only 'real death' that we suffer comes from temptations and assaults from the devil and our own conscience, while physical death is only a childish death [*Kindersterben*].¹⁵⁶

Given the reality of the resurrection which awaits us, Luther asserts that Christians are to find two great blessings in death. First, death means that "the whole tragedy of this world's ills is ended."¹⁵⁷ Secondly, death is a blessing because it marks the end of our struggle with sin and vice. Luther claimed that "the evils of the soul, namely, its sins, are incomparably worse than the evils of the body," a fact, if only recognized, "should make death very desirable."¹⁵⁸ Moreover, the Christian who loves righteousness must love death, since God "imposed death on Adam immediately after his sin as a cure for sin," death being imposed "as a penance and satisfaction."¹⁵⁹ Yet, Luther's personal correspondence over his eldest daughter's death reveals just how difficult it can be to view death in this fashion. After Magdalen's death, Luther admonished his son John "to curb that womanish feeling, to get accustomed to enduring evil, and not to indulge in that childlike weakness."¹⁶⁰ In another letter however, Luther concedes that while he and his wife ought to be joyful at Magdalen's death as an escape from the world and the devil, "the force of our natural love is so great that we are unable to do this without crying and grieving in [our] hearts, or even without experiencing death ourselves."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁴ *Table Talk*, DCCXC, 319-320.

¹⁵⁵ *Funeral of Duke John*, in *LW* 51, 242.

¹⁵⁶ *Funeral of Duke John*, in *LW* 51, 237-238.

¹⁵⁷ *Fourteen Consolations*, in *LW* 42, 149.

¹⁵⁸ *Fourteen Consolations*, in *LW* 42, 150.

¹⁵⁹ *Fourteen Consolations*, in *LW* 42, 151.

¹⁶⁰ *Fourteen Consolations*, in *LW* 50, 236.

¹⁶¹ "Letter to Casper Müller (1536)," in *LW* 50, 124. See also *LW* 54, 431-432.

Despite Luther's apparent diminishment of the significance of death, he entertained no joyful notion of death, for the whole world is afraid of death: "The whole world dreads nothing more than death and desires nothing more than life."¹⁶² Even the great saints "were not glad to die."¹⁶³ Yet, for a Christian to fear death only signals that we "love death and sin rather than life and righteousness."¹⁶⁴ Indeed, "the greater our sins, the more fearful is death."¹⁶⁵ At the same time however, Luther once noted, "I like to see those who tremble and shake and grow pale when they face death and yet get through."¹⁶⁶ Even Christ himself approached his own death with considerable effort and 'trembling.'

There is no one who would not choose to submit to all other evils if thereby he could avoid the evil of death. Even the saints dreaded it, and Christ submitted to it with trembling and bloody sweat.¹⁶⁷

Therefore, Luther enjoined Christians to be mindful of death throughout one's life, especially when death is *not* imminent. "We should familiarize ourselves with death during our lifetime, inviting death into our presence when it is still at a distance and not on the move."¹⁶⁸ Contemplation of death teaches us to place the right value on the temporal. In his exposition of Psalm 102, Luther reads "Call me not away in the midst of my days" (v. 24) as a petition that God "would not take me away from here without foreknowledge and preparation, but teach me to think about death and what is to come, so that in this way I might become anxious and a despiser of all temporal things."¹⁶⁹

Luther's understanding of the difficult nature of life and the perpetual battle against sin largely echoes that of Augustine. Though he acknowledged that bodily health is one of the greatest gifts given to humankind, he also recognized that the numerous

¹⁶² *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 15:28, in *LW* 28, 146.

¹⁶³ *Table Talk*, in *Works*, vol. 54, 64.

¹⁶⁴ *Fourteen Consolations*, in *LW* 42, 151.

¹⁶⁵ *Table Talk* CLXI, 61.

¹⁶⁶ *Table Talk*, in *Works*, vol. 54, 64.

¹⁶⁷ *Fourteen Consolations*, in *LW* 42, 129. Luther considers the words of Matthew 26:38—"my soul is sorrowful unto death" among "the greatest words in all the Scriptures," Luther, *Table Talk*, in *LW* 1, 429.

¹⁶⁸ *A Sermon on Preparing to Die*, in *LW* 42, 101. See also *Table Talk*, 65.

¹⁶⁹ *Commentary on the Psalms* 102:22, in *LW* 11, 315.

maladies of both body and soul render any excessive concern to extend this life as foolish. Life and death are often spoken in the same sentence. Christians are to be ever mindful of death, most especially when one is in good health, and to consider the suffering and death of Christ when it does draw near, whose resurrection renders our death a sleep.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

Kierkegaard's concern with death can be examined on several levels, as death is a theme that runs through nearly all of his work. On one level, he describes death as the end of our earthly existence. He takes up the reality of physiological death in his imaginary reflection 'at a graveside,' described as a discourse about "death's decision."¹⁷⁰ In this work he distinguishes between *earnestness* and *mood*.¹⁷¹

Earnestness strips away all of the devices and deceptions typically deployed in denying or sanitizing death's reality. Earnestness recognizes death as total, decisive, final, absolute, and refuses to speculate on soul's flight to the eternal realm when the body dies.¹⁷² Such earnestness thinks about oneself as dead and is not deceived but reconciled to life while knowing how to fear death.¹⁷³ Too often however we deceive ourselves with *mood* where we desire a 'sudden death' where we "shove away the thought of death and shove death out of life as much as possible."¹⁷⁴ Even the sorrow attendant upon a child's death is only a mood, as is depression's longing for one's own death.¹⁷⁵ He continues,

Likewise, to be wide awake and to think death, to think what surely is more decisive than old age, which of course also has its time, to think

¹⁷⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, "At a Graveside," in *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 71-102.

¹⁷¹ Kierkegaard seems to anticipate Martin Heidegger's construal of the relationship between death and authentic existence. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, Eng.: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 303.

¹⁷² See Plato, *Phaedo* 106d-118a. See also George Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard* (Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 142.

¹⁷³ "At a Graveside," 74-75, 88.

¹⁷⁴ *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, vol. 1 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967), no. 717, 335. See also nos. 721, 723, and 731, 336, 337, and 339-340 respectively; *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. Walter Lowrie, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 147-148.

¹⁷⁵ "At a Graveside," 81, 87.

that all was over, that everything was lost along with life, in order then to win everything in life—this is earnestness.¹⁷⁶

In considering “death’s decision” as it relates to earnestness, Kierkegaard first notes that it is *decisive* in rejecting the consolations of the ‘false flatterer’ of death’s postponement, thereby creating the proper momentum for life by relativizing the *length* of life, enabling one “to make a long life as meaningful as in a time of scarcity, as watchful as if sought by thieving hands.”¹⁷⁷ Death’s decision is also *indefinable*. Death is “the only certainty, and the only thing about which nothing is certain.”¹⁷⁸ Nothing can really be said of this enigma, Kierkegaard muses, since death is an equality of nothingness, of empty space and utter silence. The rich and poor, young and old, the powerful and the powerless, the beautiful and the wretched—all are made equal in the grave. Earnestness understands that the tree bearing *no* fruit (Matthew 3:10) will be cut down with the tree bearing *good* fruit.¹⁷⁹ Finally, says Kierkegaard, death’s decision is *inexplicable*; death explains nothing, but rather “discloses the state of the explainer’s own innermost being,”¹⁸⁰ giving death a ‘retroactive power.’¹⁸¹ Any supposed explanation is like a wise saying in the mouth of a fool. Indeed, reticence towards any explanation reveals the beginnings of earnestness. It is “death’s earnest warning to the living.”¹⁸² One learns in the dialectic of the certainty and uncertainty of death’s decision. When the certainty of death has destroyed the delusions of the promised years ahead—thoughts like ‘I have a long life in front of me’—the uncertainty of death comes as an aid to the earnest person, daily ‘watching over’ the learner’s use of her time, whether young or old.¹⁸³

While Kierkegaard speaks of death as a finality, he nevertheless firmly embraces the concept of eternity, invoking such terms as ‘heavenly kingdom,’ or ‘other world,’ or

¹⁷⁶ “At a Graveside,” 76.

¹⁷⁷ “At a Graveside,” 83-84, 91.

¹⁷⁸ “At a Graveside,” 91.

¹⁷⁹ “At a Graveside,” 93.

¹⁸⁰ “At a Graveside,” 96.

¹⁸¹ “At a Graveside,” 97, 98, 100.

¹⁸² “At a Graveside,” 100.

¹⁸³ “At a Graveside,” 94-96, 99, 102. See also *Journals and Papers*, vol. 4, no. 4327, 238.

‘heaven’ or even ‘paradise’ as the place where ‘every tear shall be wiped away.’¹⁸⁴ Nevertheless, he resolutely rejects immortality as a life ‘indefinitely prolonged,’ as such thoughts undermine earnestness.¹⁸⁵ Kierkegaard prefers to speak of immortality as “the Judgment.”¹⁸⁶ Thus, the question regarding one’s immortality is not whether or not it can be proven—for faith exists between the extremes of confident assurance and utter despair—but “whether I live as my immortality requires me to live.”¹⁸⁷ The one who is sure of his immortality has forfeited his life in a most horrible way.¹⁸⁸ Better, says Kierkegaard, is uncertainty, the fear and trembling of a sinner before the ‘Holy One.’¹⁸⁹

If immortality as Judgment sustains faith’s existence in life, immortality as *eternity* radically punctuates the suffering we experience in this life to the extent that in life we suffer but ‘once.’¹⁹⁰ Jesus Christ too suffered only ‘once,’ though his whole life was suffering.¹⁹¹ “Eternally understood, the temporal is the instant, and the instant eternally understood is only ‘once.’”¹⁹² Thus, “the youth who stands at the beginning of life says with the same justification as does the old man who stands at the end of it and looks back over the distance traveled: ‘We live only once.’”¹⁹³ However, we often fail to measure time correctly so that “ten years or forty years seems as an

¹⁸⁴ “The Moment No. 2: Comfort and—the Concern for an Eternal Happiness,” and “The Moment No. 9: So That Is How the Matter Stands,” in *The Moment and Late Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 109-111, 312 respectively; “Joyful Notes in the Strife of Suffering,” in *Christian Discourses*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 107; *Without Authority*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 44-45. See also Watkin, “Kierkegaard’s View of Death,” 73.

¹⁸⁵ “Resurrection of the Dead,” 215.

¹⁸⁶ “Resurrection of the Dead,” 212, 215; *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, no. 727, 338; no. 845, 386.

¹⁸⁷ “Resurrection of the Dead,” 213.

¹⁸⁸ “Resurrection of the Dead,” 218.

¹⁸⁹ “Resurrection of the Dead,” 219.

¹⁹⁰ “The Moment, No. 8: One Lives Only Once,” in *Moment and Late Writings*, 293; “Joyful Notes,” in *Christian Discourses*, 102 ff.

¹⁹¹ “Joyful Notes,” 103.

¹⁹² “Joyful Notes,” 103. Elsewhere Kierkegaard exclaims, “What indeed is seventy years compared with eternity!” 107.

¹⁹³ “Joyful Notes,” 104.

enormously long time.”¹⁹⁴ Hence, Kierkegaard urges us to “let eternity help thee to be able to suffer but once.”¹⁹⁵ So heavy does the weight of eternity bear down on the temporal that our sufferings here are a mere illusion, unable to harm the soul any more than Daniel was harmed in the lions’ den or the Three Children in the fiery furnace.¹⁹⁶

Kierkegaard however does not minimize the benefit of temporal affliction, as it cultivates one’s soul and recruits hope for eternity, stripping away the distractions that prevent the necessary ‘inward turn,’ the very distractions whose “medium of communication is . . . *the hope of youth*.”¹⁹⁷ While one might think that the point of life is to move through it with as little suffering as possible, Christianity sees that all terrors come from eternity which relativizes all earthly suffering, “and that the point is therefore not to slip happily and well through this life, but rightly to relate oneself to eternity through suffering.”¹⁹⁸ Eternity is attractive in part, says Kierkegaard, *because* the Christian life demands a “complete forsaking” of temporality—to suffer in the temporal realm is a mark of God’s grace.¹⁹⁹ For Kierkegaard the distinction between the ‘here’ and the ‘hereafter’ is fundamentally what it is to exist. One overcomes the changes of temporality by means of the eternal, even though life involves suffering.²⁰⁰

One lives only once . . . the God of love is in heaven fondly loving you. Yes, loving; that is why he would like you finally to will what he for the sake of eternity wills for you: that you might resolve to will to

¹⁹⁴ “The Moment No. 8: An Eternity for Repenting,” 297.

¹⁹⁵ “Joyful Notes,” 106.

¹⁹⁶ “Joyful Notes,” 107.

¹⁹⁷ “Joyful Notes,” 114.

¹⁹⁸ “One Lives Only Once,” 294; “The Moment, No. 8: What Can Be Recollected Eternally?” 298-300.

¹⁹⁹ *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, no. 843, 385. Kierkegaard considers Judaism’s concept of eternity ‘weak’ in that it promises too much in this life.

²⁰⁰ *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 19; *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 506; *Journals and Papers*, vol. 4, nos. 5016-5038, 589-600.

suffer, that is, that you might resolve to will to love him, because you can love him only in suffering.²⁰¹

Temporality can only be rightly judged when considered against eternity, eternity as Judgment which sustains our faith and transforms our suffering—though it last a lifetime—into a ‘once.’

Death and Despair

To only have spoken only of the earnestness of death and the weight of eternity however would be to overlook the profound psychological insights Kierkegaard developed with regard to faith and one’s authentic relationship to death, a relationship which is inextricably related to his anthropology. Kierkegaard regards the human being as a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, of the temporal and the eternal, of possibility and necessity.²⁰² As such, the human is a trichotomy of soma, psyche, and spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14-16; 15:38-49). While the human being can be described as a synthesis of the psychical and the physical, Kierkegaard asserts that any synthesis is “unthinkable if the two [psychical and the physical] are not united in a third,” the spirit.²⁰³ The spirit “is precisely that which constitutes the relation” between body and soul (psyche).²⁰⁴ Spirit thus constitutes the *synthesis* between the psychical and the physical. Becoming spirit is also the ultimate goal of every human being; to become spirit is to become a self.²⁰⁵ Indeed, being spirit is “the absolute” that any human can be, whether one realizes it or not.²⁰⁶

It is precisely this synthetic constitution of humanity which gives rise for the possibility of *despair*, an advanced form of anxiety described as a ‘sickness unto

²⁰¹ “One Lives Only Once,” 294.

²⁰² *Sickness*, 13.

²⁰³ Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 43. See also *Sickness*, 127-128.

²⁰⁴ Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 44. See also 48, 52, 81, 85, 88, 122, 136; *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 127-128.

²⁰⁵ Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 13, 22, 43.

²⁰⁶ Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 13, 22, 43.

death.’²⁰⁷ Kierkegaard defines despair as the ‘misrelation in the relation of the synthesis’ between the dialectic of the finite and the infinite, of the divine and the human, and of possibility and necessity.²⁰⁸ Despair is also highly dialectical; it is both an excellence and a defect, a tormentor and the pathway to salvation.²⁰⁹ As such, despair is worse than death itself. Death is not the sickness unto death, much less is suffering.²¹⁰ When the greatest danger is death, one instinctively hopes for life. When one *despairs* however, one hopes for death, for there is “infinitely much more hope in death than there is in life.”²¹¹ Yet, because the human person is spirit, a synthesis of the temporal and eternal, one cannot die from despair, even though the body must die.²¹²

If a person were to die of despair as one dies of a sickness, then the eternal in him, the self, must be able to die in the same sense as the body dies of sickness. But this is impossible; the dying of despair continually converts itself into a living.²¹³

This is the torment of despair, says Kierkegaard, that the self is perpetually dying, yet unable to die.

Moreover, there are various levels of despair, says Kierkegaard, the first being an unawareness that one *is* spirit. The most common form of despair is ignorance over having an eternal self, that one is a spirit before God.²¹⁴ Most move through life’s stages—from childhood to old age—in a ‘vegetative-animal process,’ suppressing both the consciousness of oneself as spirit and the seriousness of death.²¹⁵ Other forms of despair concern the imbalance in the infinitude/finitude,

²⁰⁷ Kierkegaard refers to anxiety as the “dizziness of freedom,” or “the selfish infinity of possibility,” which ‘ensnaringly disquiets,’ *Concept of Anxiety*, 61, 91.

²⁰⁸ *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, no. 68, 25; no. 749, 347; *Sickness*, 15.

²⁰⁹ *Sickness*, 6, 14-15.

²¹⁰ *Sickness*, 8.

²¹¹ *Sickness*, 18; 7-9.

²¹² *Concept of Anxiety*, 93.

²¹³ *Sickness*, 18; Plato, *Republic*, X, 608 c-610.

²¹⁴ *Sickness*, 25, 42-46.

²¹⁵ *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, no. 67, 24-25.

possibility/necessity syntheses of the self in varying degrees of consciousness or awareness. For instance, despair is infinitude's lack of the finite.

Every human existence that presumably has become or simply wants to be infinite, in fact, every moment in which a human existence has become or simply wants to be infinite, is despair. For the self is the synthesis of which the finite is the limiting and the infinite is the extending constituent.²¹⁶

The same takes place in the realm of possibility/necessity to the extent that everything seems possible, and the "abyss swallows up the self."²¹⁷ Time for the actual grows increasingly shorter as new possibilities appear

. . . in such a rapid succession that it seems as if everything were possible, and this is exactly the final moment, the point at which the individual himself becomes a mirage.²¹⁸

What is missing is the power to submit to *necessity*, or, one's own limitations.

However, one can also despair by focusing only on finitude and necessity. Finitude's despair of the infinite occurs when one forgets that one is a self (e.g. is spirit) and is thus utterly absorbed in the matters of everyday life in a 'despairing reductionism,'²¹⁹ which is also akin to losing possibility. Yet another form of despair is failing to realize that *true* despair is a lack of the eternal.²²⁰ In this case the question of immortality plagues such a person, indicating that she has no self.²²¹ Kierkegaard describes this particular form of despair, a despair common among the young, as 'immediacy with a dash of reflection.' Nero serves as an example of this kind of despair, as one who as an adult pursued the aesthetic life and perpetual youth while remaining a child with regard to anxiety and despair.²²² Indeed, faith and wisdom need not come with the mere passage of time as do teeth and facial hair.

²¹⁶ *Sickness*, 30.

²¹⁷ *Sickness*, 36.

²¹⁸ *Sickness*, 36.

²¹⁹ *Sickness*, 30-33.

²²⁰ *Sickness*, 51.

²²¹ *Sickness*, 56.

²²² *Either/Or II*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 221 f.; Pattison, *Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, 55-61.

Ultimately, Kierkegaard asserts that all forms of despair are sin, whose remedy is not found in virtue, but in *faith*.²²³ Faith consists in the proper relating of one's self to one's self, where the self rests transparently in the power that established the self, God himself.²²⁴ Thus, because the Christian *can* despair, she has an advantage over the 'natural man.'²²⁵ The natural man is a child, and misinformed about what is truly horrifying—despair—and shrinks from what is not horrifying, death. The Christian is an adult, knows about what is truly miserable, and considers death as a jest.²²⁶ By doing so, the Christian learns how to die. Christianly understood, notes Kierkegaard, death as despair "is indeed the expression for the state of deepest spiritual wretchedness, and yet the cure is simply to die, to die to the world."²²⁷ To be a Christian means to live, and yet to be in a constant state of dying.²²⁸

Kierkegaard appears to downplay suffering in this life and a concern for longevity with his emphasis on eternity, compressing the Christian's suffering in this life into a 'once.' His concern however is that one learn to use 'death's decision' to produce earnestness, a wise use of one's time in view of the impending judgment. Yet, at the same time, he is concerned that the certainty of eternity might also considerably damage earnestness; hence, he speaks of immortality as Judgment. Within this dialectic one is enabled to live 'with fear and trembling.' Indeed, to be a self, to be spirit, is to live in the dialectic of despair as both a sickness and a cure, a despair which recognizes that one is a synthesis of the physical and the psychical, the finite and the infinite. Thus, whether one chooses to focus on death or flee it, whether one lives a life resigned to its brevity and brutality, or expends one's energy in the pursuit of perpetual youth, one is in despair. The former wrongly construes death as the worst that may befall one, failing to recognize that one is spirit and therefore eternal, while the latter becomes lost in possibility, in imagining a never-ending life, failing to recognize the limits of the body. The key to rooting out despair which engenders

²²³ *Sickness*, 82. See Romans 14:23.

²²⁴ *Sickness*, 14; *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, no. 749, 348.

²²⁵ *Sickness*, 8, 15.

²²⁶ *Sickness*, 8-9.

²²⁷ *Sickness*, 6. *Journals and Papers*, vol. 3, no. 3423, 566.

²²⁸ *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, no. 731, 340.

both a rush toward death and a concern for the length of life is faith in the One who has created us.

For all of these theologians the weight of eternity considerably both heightens the significance of what one does with one's limited life while at the same time relativizing the significance of its length. Moreover, any discussion of death, life, and resurrection is considerably informed by the burden of sin, sin which has marred embodied human existence and introduced several forms of suffering into the world. None are able to speak of the desire for a longer life apart from reflecting on the sin-affected nature of our existence, even as the desire for long life is readily acknowledged. One can sense the tensions between this world and the next, between the limited body and one's limitless desires fully expressed in these theologians, all of whom in their own way address these tensions from within the Christian narrative which acknowledges the fallen, finite nature of our existence, and the better future to come. They remind us that happiness is not to be found in this life, even though it is occasionally granted by God. Moreover, one is reminded that one's finitude and the future judgment offers the opportunity to develop virtues (Aquinas), to place the right value on the temporal (Luther), and to pursue earnestness (Kierkegaard).

While these theologians reflect a proper indifference to the length of life in light of the realities of sin and bodily resurrection, there were other early Christians who believed that there was a way to put on the redemption body and effectively undo some of the effects of the curse of sin, effectively reordering soul and body to more closely approximate the original order enjoyed by Adam and Eve before the fall. Moreover, it was believed that this bodily redemption entailed an attenuation of the human aging process. This bodily incorruption however was thoroughly subsumed under the process of sanctification which involved the practice of fasting. In the remainder of this thesis I explore the link between sanctification, fasting, and longevity as presented by Athanasius, who saw fasting as a way to return to the Adamic state where soul and body were properly ordered under God. These insights will be further qualified by interacting with Karl Barth's discussion of the second Adam, the real man Jesus, who is the standard for what it means to be human, with soul and body in their proper order.

Chapter 5: Longevity, Asceticism, and ‘Re-making’ the Body in Athanasius and St. Antony

“There is no hell but this—a body without a soul, or a soul without a body.”¹

Oscar Wilde

“For not only are the souls of the saints different from those of sinners, but also their bodies.”²

John of Shmūn

While the last chapter revealed that the promise of the resurrection body and the weight of sin minimized the significance of a long life on earth, the view that life should or could be prolonged is not utterly foreign to Christian thought and practice. It is interesting to note however that in the third century in Alexandria, there were several key ascetic figures whose longevity far outpaced the life expectancies of those around them. There is evidence that the desert ascetics experienced greatly extended lives despite living in very harsh conditions. In this chapter I will focus on the great desert ascetic St. Antony as found in Athanasius’ *Life of Antony*, widely recognized as “the first and most influential hagiographical text in the Christian tradition.”³ This examination of the *Life of Antony* will reveal the theological principles behind the ascetic ideal, principles which gave rise to practices that allowed the ascetic to ‘remake’ his own body in a larger process of refining the soul,

¹ Paul Montazolli, “Introduction,” *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1995), xiii, quoting Oscar Wilde.

² John of Shmūn, *An Encomium on Saint Antony* 19, in *The Life of Antony: The Coptic Life and the Greek Life*, trans. Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Kalamazoo, MI: Cisterian Publications, 2003), 20.

³ Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making Of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 126. Peter R. L. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 213 n. 1 cites a work by R. Draguet as a strong case against direct Athanasian authorship. See Rubenson addresses the arguments against Athanasian authorship while acknowledging great confusion among scholars over the last several years, *Letters*, 126-132.

principles which approximate at least one scientific attempt to arrest the aging process.

Athanasius produced his biographical⁴ account of Antony in response to the request of several unnamed monks around 356 CE, portraying Antony as the ideal Christian ascetic, as one who attained victory over the impulses of his own body, disease, attacks from demonic forces, as well as those learned in Greek philosophy. It should therefore not be surprising to find Antony in alignment with Athanasius on certain key themes of Nicene Orthodoxy, particularly in Antony's opposition to the Arian and Manichaean heretics, as well as the Meletian schismatics.⁵ Though this might suggest that Athanasius had composed a largely polemical work, it is worth noting that one of his contemporaries, Gregory of Nazianzus, remarked that Athanasius had "composed a rule for the monastic life in the form of a narrative."⁶ Athanasius himself introduces his work with the hope that it might inspire imitation of the great Antony, as "a sufficient pattern of discipline."⁷ His aims were certainly met. The influence of the *Life of Antony* on the development of monasticism can hardly be underestimated. It has been noted that in Antony and his flight to the Egyptian desert, "the man on the boundary appealed to many in the center. He came to symbolize, through Athanasius' artistry, 'the type of the Christian, the ideal portrait of the human being, as he should be.'"⁸

⁴ It is important to understand 'biographical' in its ancient sense. It has been observed that *The Life of Antony* shares a similar genre to the Greco-Roman *encomium*—a work relating the life and deeds of a celebrated person who has died. See Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 1998), 166-167; William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 68-69; Robert C. Gregg, "Introduction," in *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 5-6. Similarly, Tim Vivan, "Introduction," in *Life of Antony*, xxv, has concluded:

Recent studies have shown that the picture of Antony given to us in the *Life* cannot be written off as 'mere' hagiography or dismissed as an implausible glorification of an ideal: whether or not the details of Antony in the *Life* are 'biographically correct', the Antony who lives and breathes in these pages is, on the whole, true to the way the early monks lived, thought, and believed.

⁵ Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 68, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, 214.

⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 21.5, quoted in David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 201.

⁷ Athanasius, "Introduction," *Life*, 195.

⁸ Gregg, "Introduction," 6, quoting Hermann Dörries, *Die Vita Antonii als Geschichtsquelle*, Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen 14 (Göttingen, 1949), 389.

The *Life of Antony* records the life of a man who at an early age renounced the pleasures of wealth and the world, who, through his gradual flight into the desert, fasting and prayer, continually and successfully battled the temptations arising both from his own bodily impulses and those of demons, continually renewing and redoubling his efforts until his body was explicitly under control of his soul.⁹ Of particular interest however is both Antony's longevity and manner of death. Athanasius reports that Antony lived to the ripe age of one hundred and five, suggesting that Antony's ascetic regime substantially impeded the physiological deterioration of his own body.¹⁰ Further investigation of this phenomenon of prolongevity suggests that there are theological commitments behind Antony's asceticism, commitments which encourage bodily longevity. Indeed, as will be evident shortly, there was the belief that specific ascetic practices enabled one to 'remake' his or her body.

Athanasius' Theological Anthropology

A proper understanding of Athanasius' conception of remaking the body is firmly rooted in the narrative of creation, redemption, and bodily resurrection. Specifically, Athanasius believed that through ascetic discipline, the Christian might approach that prelapsarian state enjoyed by Adam and Eve in the garden. But it is important to understand what exactly characterizes this prelapsarian state. It is significant to note that for Athanasius, immunity from physiological death was not part of man's

⁹ For the historical setting surrounding St. Antony's life, see Peter F. Anson, *The Call of the Desert* (London: SPCK Press, 1964), 13-17; Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 2-6; James E. Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburgh, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999); Charles Kannengiesser, "Athanasius of Alexandria and the Ascetic Movement of His Time," in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 479-492.

¹⁰ Athanasius, *Life* 89, 91, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, 219-221. The influence of the *Life of Antony* is already evident in Jerome's subsequent attempt to surpass the feats of Antony in the mythical figure of Paulus of Concordia. Jerome claims that Paulus was the first hermit, who outlived even Antony, surviving to the age of 113. See *The Life of Paulus the First Hermit*, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 6, 299-303. See also Paul B. Harvey Jr., "Jerome: Life of Paul, the First Hermit," in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 357-359.

original condition.¹¹ Rather, he reasoned that since man was created *ex nihilo*, man could only be none other than perishable, mortal, subject to bodily decay, tending towards dissolution and non-existence. “For man is by nature mortal, inasmuch as he is made out of what is not.”¹² Thus, the body is mortal by *nature*, and “lasts but for a time.”¹³ Since the body was, among all other things, created *ex nihilo*, there could be no question of a prelapsarian state whereby the body was free from corruption.¹⁴

Yet, despite this tendency towards bodily decay, Adam and Eve had at their disposal the means by which to slow this corruption. Athanasius speaks of God’s gift to humankind, making them after his own image, “giving them a portion even of the power of His own Word; so that having as it were a kind of reflexion of the Word.”¹⁵ This ‘reflexion’ was most manifest in their rationality, which enabled them to contemplate the mysteries of God. It was therefore Adam and Eve’s responsibility to continually exercise this rationality in the contemplation of God. In his grace, God enabled man

to see and know realities by means of assimilation to Himself, giving him also a conception and knowledge even of His own eternity, in order that, preserving his nature intact, he might not ever either depart from his idea of God, . . . living the life of immortality unharmed and truly blessed.¹⁶

As David Brakke aptly observes, “the body was mortal and subject to corruption: only constant attention to God prevented it from decaying into non-being.”¹⁷ While it is not difficult to detect the influence of Origen and certain elements of Neo-Platonic philosophy in Athanasius’ description, it must be stressed that this contemplation of

¹¹ Unlike Augustine, for Athanasius there was no initial condition whereby it was possible for man not to die. It is worth noting however, that even Augustine believed that aging was a feature of prelapsarian man, though successfully muted by the fruit from the tree of life. See *City of God* Bk. 14, Ch. 26, 628.

¹² Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word* 3.4; 4.6, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, 38.

¹³ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 32.1; 33.1, 21.

¹⁴ See *Against the Heathen* 41.2-3, 26; *Incarnation* 43.4, 59-60.

¹⁵ Athanasius, *Incarnation* 3.3, 37.

¹⁶ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 2.2, 5.

¹⁷ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 147. See *Against the Heathen* 33, 21-22; *Incarnation* 4, 38-39.

God in the garden is an *embodied* contemplation. Unlike Origen, who asserted that the original creation of bodiless minds beholding God eventually ‘cooled,’ prompting God to create a variety of bodies in which these cooled minds (now, souls) would dwell,¹⁸ Athanasius asserts that man was created with a body and soul for an *embodied* contemplation in the garden. This life-prolonging, corruption-staying activity however, was interrupted when man turned away from his contemplation of God and spiritual things towards his body, breaking the ‘law’ that God established in the garden, forbidding that he partake from the tree of knowledge. “But men, making light of better things, and holding back from apprehending them, began to seek in preference things nearer to themselves.”¹⁹ Athanasius uses the metaphor of mixing or entanglement of the body and soul when describing this shift in contemplation:

But nearer to themselves were the body and its senses; so that while removing their mind from the things perceived by thought, they began to regard themselves; and so doing, and holding to the body and the other things of sense, and deceived as it were in their own surroundings, they fell into lust of themselves, . . . they entangled their soul with bodily pleasures, vexed and turbid with all kind of lusts, while they wholly forgot the power they originally had from God.²⁰

Thus, the mind, having been turned away from God toward bodily desires, “began to be habituated to these desires, so that they were afraid to leave them: whence the soul became subject to cowardice and alarms, and pleasures and thoughts of mortality.”²¹ Hence, the prospect of death became exceeding dreadful. In describing man’s fall from his prelapsarian state, one can see Athanasius’ understanding of the proper relationship between body and soul. The soul is regarded as the *hgemwn*, or governor of the body. Echoing Plato, he likens the soul to the charioteer. The soul that has turned away from God drives “the members of the body beyond what is proper.”²²

¹⁸ Origen, *On First Principles* Bk.2, Ch. 8.3, *ANF*, vol. 4, 288. See also *On First Principles* Bk. 3, Ch. 4-5, *ANF*, vol. 4, 342-343.

¹⁹ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 3.1, 5.

²⁰ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 3.2, 5.

²¹ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 3.4, 5. It is important to observe that Athanasius uses the terms mind and soul to emphasize one’s universal relationship to God and one’s analytical relationship to the body, respectively. For a helpful description of Athanasius’ use of the terms νοῦς, ψύχη and σῶμα, see Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 61-63.

²² Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 5.2, 6.

In addition to a heightened concern over one's impending death as a result of this contemplative detour towards the body, the bodily corruption natural to man was actually hastened. "But when this was come to pass, men began to die while corruption thenceforward prevailed against them, gaining even more than its natural power over the whole race."²³ While keeping the law in the garden meant life "without sorrow or pain or care, besides having the promise of incorruption in heaven," a transgression of the law meant that they would incur "that corruption in death which was theirs by nature: no longer to live in paradise, but cast out of it from that time forth to abide in death and corruption."²⁴ Had man remained in a proper state of contemplation of God, appropriately unhindered by the desires of the body, his natural corruption would have been somehow 'reduced.'

For man is by nature mortal, inasmuch as he is made out of what is not; but by reason of his likeness to Him that is (and if he still preserved this likeness by keeping Him in his knowledge) he would stay his natural corruption, and remain incorrupt.²⁵

Brakke has asserted that Athanasius' portrait of Adam in the garden is one of an ascetic from the very beginning. Thus, initially, the Adam of *On the Incarnation* was "not merely a contemplative; he was also an ascetic in full control of his body."²⁶

However, the possibility of remaining with God in the garden and 'staying' that corruption natural to man in light of his creation *ex nihilo*, was closed down after man turned his attention from that which is incorruptible [God] to the corruptible [the body].

But men, having rejected things eternal, and, by counsel of the devil, turned to the things of corruption, became the cause of their own corruption and death, being, as I said before, by nature corruptible, but

²³ Athanasius, *Incarnation* 5.2, 38.

²⁴ Athanasius, *Incarnation* 3.4, 38. See also *Incarnation* 6.2, 39.

²⁵ Athanasius, *Incarnation* 4.6, 38. See also *Incarnation* 4.4, 38.

²⁶ *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 147; Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 59-60. This stands in stark contrast to other more allegorical accounts where the prelapsarian Adam was thought not to need food. See for instance Ambrose, *De paradiso* 42, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 42, *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1961), 320-321.

destined, by the grace following from partaking of the Word, to have escaped their natural state, had they remained good.²⁷

Mankind as created then, both body and soul, was not free from bodily decay, though they possessed the means by which this decay could be hindered or retarded through the contemplation of God. Thus, “stripped of the protective clothing of divine contemplation, people were now exposed to the process of corruption and death natural to them.”²⁸ Man’s sin hastened this bodily decay, leading to the condition where “the rational man made in God’s image was disappearing and the handiwork of God was in process of dissolution.”²⁹ Moreover, the death natural to man now had a ‘legal hold’ over man since he had violated God’s command (Genesis 2:17). It is this condition says Athanasius, which the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, came to rectify.

Christ came to pay the debt of sin and to undo the corruption of human kind, by taking on a corruptible body and dying in our stead. While Athanasius speaks of Christ’s death as a ransom or satisfaction of debt,³⁰ his primary emphasis on the incarnation involves the restoration of mankind; specifically, the restoration of the divine image in us. Athanasius is well-known for his concept of man’s deification or *theosis* (**qeopoihsi**). Christ “was made man that we might be made God.”³¹ Elsewhere he says “for He has become Man, that He might deify us in Himself.”³² Athanasius suggests that part of this deification, or *theosis*, is bodily.

For therefore did He [Christ] assume the body originate and human, that having renewed it as its Framer, He might deify it in Himself [**ejh eautw/ qeopoihsh**], and thus might introduce us all into the kingdom of heaven after his likeness.³³

²⁷ Athanasius, *Incarnation* 5.1, 38. See also J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1960), 346-348.

²⁸ David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 148.

²⁹ Athanasius, *Incarnation* 6.1, 39. See *Against the Heathen* 8 for a further description of man’s ‘plunge’ into the darkness.

³⁰ See *Incarnation* 20, 38; *Four Discourses against the Arians* 1.4; 1.60; 2.69; 3.3, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, 332, 341, 389-390, 410 respectively; *Defence of the Nicene Definition* 14, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, 159.

³¹ *Incarnation* 54.3, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, 65.

³² *Ad Adelphium* 4, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, 576.

³³ *Four Discourses* 2.70, 386.

Statements such as these pose difficulties to the Western mindset. Certainly, if the idea of ‘playing God,’ so frequently invoked in theological discussions concerning genetic engineering, is controversial, the idea of ‘becoming God’ appears no less striking. Indeed, Athanasius asserts that Christ has appropriated sin and corruption, things pertaining to the flesh, and destroyed them. Thus, on account of Christ, “having appropriated [*idiopoionomenou*] what pertains to the flesh, no longer do these things touch the body, because of the Word who has come in it, but they are destroyed by Him.”³⁴ Athanasius frequently quotes 2 Peter 1:4 which speaks of the divine power given us by God enabling us to participate in the divine nature, escaping the moral corruption caused by evil desires.³⁵

Athanasius invokes language that speaks of Christ’s sanctification of the body,³⁶ referring to Christ as ‘the Physician and Saviour,’ undoing the corruption internal to our bodies by taking on a corruptible body himself, thereby ‘winding life close to the body.’³⁷ By ‘undoing’ death, Athanasius repeatedly speaks of a restoration of our bodily incorruptibility.

Whence also, whereas the flesh is born of Mary Bearer of God, He Himself is said to have been born, who furnishes to others an origin of being; in order that He may transfer our origin into Himself, and we may no longer, as mere earth, return to earth, but as being knit into the Word from heaven, may be carried to heaven by Him. Therefore in like manner not without reason has He transferred to Himself the other affections of the body also; that we, no longer as being men, but as proper to the Word, may have a share in eternal life. For no longer according to our former origin in Adam do we die; but henceforward our origin and all infirmity of flesh being transferred to the Word, we rise from the earth, the curse from sin being removed, because of Him who is in us, and who has become a curse for us.³⁸

Elsewhere Athanasius speaks not only of Christ taking of the affections and sins of our bodies into himself, but of ‘clothing us with immortality and incorruptibility.’³⁹

³⁴ *Four Discourses* 2.69, 386. See also *Incarnation* 44.6, 60.

³⁵ See *Four Discourses* 1.16, 316; *Ad Adelphium* 4, 576; *Life* 74, 215.

³⁶ *Incarnation* 43.6, 60.

³⁷ *Incarnation* 44, 60.

³⁸ *Four Discourses* 3.33, 411-412.

³⁹ *Incarnation* 9, 40, 41.

David Brakke summarizes Athanasius' understanding of the Word incarnate and the implications for human embodiment:

As the Word perfectly controlled his assumed body and remained untouched by its passions, he transformed the body itself, rendering it incorruptible, both morally and physically: The Word's perfect guidance divinized the flesh. Moral courage and control of the bodily passions were once again possible for human beings because they shared a "kinship of the flesh" with the Word's assumed body.⁴⁰

While Athanasius is clear that our ultimate incorruptibility will be attained by future bodily resurrection,⁴¹ it is not entirely clear how exactly one comes to share in Christ's incorruptibility while living on this earth. Often Athanasius speaks as if this incorruptibility has been transferred to all humankind, failing to distinguish between Christ's material body and the bodies of individuals. It has been noted that at times Athanasius' Platonism allowed him to speak as if Christ's taking on flesh has affected all humankind consubstantially, while at other times our divinization is more a function of the Holy Spirit.⁴² At other times Athanasius intimates that the means by which the Christian inherits this incorruption is through baptism or the eucharist.⁴³ Still elsewhere Athanasius draws upon the adoption language in reference to our incorruptibility: by becoming man himself, Christ has adopted us as sons (**uibpoihsi**) of the Father, deifying man himself.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, while Athanasius

⁴⁰ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 150.

⁴¹ *Four Discourses* 2.61, 381.

⁴² Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 379, referring to *Four Discourses* 2.61, and *Ad Serapionem de morte Aarii* 2.6. But Alvyn Pettersen has aptly noted that though the Logos assumed a human body, "there is no sense in which Athanasius is so literal in his understanding of the Logos having assumed 'our body' that he believed that all who shared the assumed body were necessarily saved." *Athanasius and the Human Body* (Bristol, Eng.: The Bristol Press, 1990), 93; 35-39.

⁴³ Athanasius hints at baptism as one means of inheriting incorruption in *Four Discourses* 3.33, 412, where he says that "for as we are all from the earth and die in Adam, so being regenerated from above of water and Spirit, in the Christ we are all quickened; the flesh being no longer earthly, but being henceforth made Word, by reason of the God's Word who for our sake 'became flesh.'" See Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 150-151; Carlton Mills Badger Jr., "The New Man Created in God: Christology, Congregation, and Asceticism in Athanasius of Alexandria" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1990), 71-74. See also *Ad Maximum Philosophum* 2, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, 578-579, where he expresses eucharistic overtones in relation to incorruptibility. "And we are deified not by partaking of the body of some man, but by receiving the Body of the Word Himself."

⁴⁴ *Four Discourses* 1.38; 3.25, 329, 407 respectively. Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 177, notes that the terms "adoption, renewal, salvation, sanctification, grace, transcendence, illumination, and vivification are all presented as equivalents to deification."

is not completely clear on how one comes to share in Christ's incorruption—apart from future bodily resurrection—he continually asserts that Christ as God incarnate has taken on human flesh in order to undo the bodily corruption natural to humans, a corruption increased by Adam's fateful decision. Yet, several have noted that this deification—in principle a deification of all humanity—must still be appropriated by individual believers.⁴⁵ Thus Brakke concludes:

Despite this systematic confusion, Athanasius' pastoral writings indicate that, even if all human beings receive the incorruption of the Word's assumed body, they must individually appropriate it through lives of ascetic discipline within the Church.⁴⁶

Certainly, talk of bodily deification or **qewsi**" creates a sense of unease among Western listeners. In his study on deification in Greek patristic thought, Norman Russell has helpfully noted the various ways in which Athanasius employed the term deification. In general, he observes a distinction between *ontological* deification invoking a participatory-type language with God involving transformation, and *ethical* deification that involves becoming *like* God via *imitation*. One finds a contemporary example of ethical deification in Esther D. Reed's *The Genesis of Ethics*, who asserts that the goal of Christian ethics is nothing less than *theosis*, "achieving our potential in Christ" by primarily concerning itself with "imitative incarnations in daily life of what we know in Jesus Christ of divine love."⁴⁷ Russell observes that Athanasius develops these two understandings of deification—ontological and ethical—in parallel.⁴⁸ Thus, Athanasius speaks of ontological deification as involving the objective work of Christ in divinizing human flesh by assuming a human body, likely appropriated via baptism and only fully realized eschatologically, and he also speaks of ethical deification occurring through the

⁴⁵ See for instance Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 1-15; 166-188. See also Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 135-163; Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 106-107.

⁴⁶ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 151-152.

⁴⁷ Esther D. Reed, *The Genesis of Ethics: On the Authority of God as the Origin of Christian Ethics* (London: Dartmon, Longman and Todd, 2000), xxix. See also x, xiii.

⁴⁸ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 184.

ascetic and contemplative life.⁴⁹ Hence, “the eschatological nature of deification does not mean that its beginnings are not discernable in this life.”⁵⁰

Indeed, Antony serves as the ideal model of ethical deification where his features of bodily incorruptibility are on display. “Antony is a man in whom we might expect to observe the experiential effects of deification.”⁵¹ However, notes Russell, Athanasius never refers to Antony as **qeopoioumeno** [one becoming divine]. Rather, the *Life of Antony* displays the ethical approach to deification, “while the ontological approach is strictly eschatological.”⁵² In fact, as will be evident shortly, the ethical deification of Antony’s asceticism did not involve an aspiration to *Godhood*, but a return to a proper *humanness* as exhibited by Adam in the garden before his fall. Antony is portrayed as seeking out ethical deification, only to be realized ontologically at the resurrection. Athanasius consistently maintains the distinction between God and man, a point especially evident in his anti-Arian writings. “Athanasius insists that the grace of sonship and deification does not collapse the difference between God and creation into a strict equality.”⁵³ In this regard it is important to emphasize that the remainder of this study will focus on the *ethical deification* found in Antony, who sought to become more like Christ through his ascetic regime, even as this regime afforded him physiological benefits which could nevertheless be couched in transformative language.

To summarize Athanasius’ theological anthropology, humans are created by God, body and soul, *ex nihilo*. While the body as initially created tended towards dissolution and non-being by its very nature, the immortal, embodied soul enjoyed the contemplation of God and things divine, enabling the body to resist the decay natural to it. Over time however, the first humans were lured away from the contemplation of God toward the needs of the body, engendering a fear of death, prompting them to eat from the forbidden tree, bringing a pronouncement of death,

⁴⁹ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 9, 184.

⁵⁰ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 184.

⁵¹ Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 184.

⁵² Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 184 n. 23.

⁵³ Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 131.

and hastening bodily decay. Christ has come and taken on a human body, paying the debt of sin, conquering death, and restoring our bodies to incorruptibility by sharing in our humanity, and at the same time sanctifying or divinizing our bodies, enabling us to participate in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). The Christian may thus look forward to her final incorruption after death at the final resurrection.

Having established the general theological framework within which Athanasius situates his anthropology, I consider Athanasius' treatment of asceticism in the *Life of Antony*, paying particular attention to its relationship to longevity. Despite Athanasius' aforementioned 'systematic inconsistency' regarding the relationship between Christ's incorruptibility the means by which humanity shares in this 'kinship of the flesh,' it appears the discipline of the ascetic life provides the means by which it is possible to appropriate bodily incorruptibility. In particular, attention to the discipline of fasting gives evidence of enhancing the body's resistance to corruption and decay.

Athanasius' Life of Antony

Early on in Athanasius' portrayal of Antony's gradual retreat into the desert, it is clear that fasting is a critical element in Antony's asceticism. Indeed, fasting was not an activity that weakened the body, but actually strengthened it. When tempted by the love of money and "the various pleasures of the table and other relaxations in life," Athanasius observes that Antony continued to "fortify his body with faith, prayers, and fasting."⁵⁴ Yet Athanasius quickly notes that Antony's ability to resist these temptations of the devil is enabled by Christ, in a synergistic effort.

For the Lord was working with Antony—the Lord who for our sake took on flesh and gave the body victory over the devil, so that all who truly fight can say, "not I but the grace of God which was with me."⁵⁵

After this first victory over temptation and the devil, Athanasius notes that Antony "more and more repressed the body and kept it in subjection," accustoming himself

⁵⁴ Athanasius, *Life* 5, 197.

⁵⁵ Athanasius, *Life* 5, 197.

to “a severer mode of life.”⁵⁶ Antony is said to have eaten once a day, and sometimes once every two or four days. He ate only salt, bread and water, abstaining completely from meat and wine. He slept on a rush mat, and avoided anointing his body with oil, lest he unnecessarily enervate the body.⁵⁷ Under such disciplines, reasons Antony, “the fibre of the soul is then sound when the pleasures of the body are diminished.”⁵⁸

Antony’s second milestone came at the age of thirty-five after he enclosed himself for many days in the tombs where he endured the bodily torment of several demons. But the Lord helped Antony again, and told him that his name would become known everywhere. Thus Antony retreated to the desert, vanishing out of site for nearly twenty years (285-305 CE). Athanasius records that when some followers came upon Antony in his desert cell, having wrenched the door off his dark dwelling, he emerged “as from a shrine.”

And when they saw him, wondered at the sight, for he had the same habit of body as before, and was neither fat, like a man without exercise, nor lean from fasting and striving with the demons, but he was just he same as they had known him before his retirement. . . . abiding in a natural [**fusin**] state.⁵⁹

His followers were surprised that Antony’s bodily condition had not deteriorated during this difficult training—though bread was apparently only brought to him twice a year—but had actually improved. His rigorous asceticism had appeared to preserve his body in a healthy state longer than anyone could have expected. Athanasius continues this trend throughout the remainder of this work. Indeed, Peter Brown has observed that after the initial chapters of *Life of Antony*, Athanasius presents a life “that seems to have stood still for a further eighty years.”⁶⁰ After Antony’s discovery the desert is gradually colonized by monks, each living in their individual cell.⁶¹ Antony’s subsequent exhortations to these monks reveal

⁵⁶ Athanasius, *Life* 7, 197.

⁵⁷ Athanasius, *Life* 7, 198.

⁵⁸ Athanasius, *Life* 7, 198.

⁵⁹ Athanasius, *Life* 14, 200.

⁶⁰ Brown, *Body and Society*, 214.

⁶¹ Athanasius, *Life* 14, 200.

Athanasius' insights to the ascetic life as one requiring a discipline of both body and soul.

Antony encourages his followers to daily increase in their earnestness and virtue, given that "the kingdom of heaven is within you."⁶² The means by which one attains virtue is by returning one's soul to what Antony calls the 'natural state.'

For when the soul hath its spiritual faculty in a natural state virtue is formed. And it is in a natural state when it remains as it came into existence. And when it came into existence it was fair and exceeding honest. . . . For rectitude of soul consists in its having its spiritual part in its natural state as created.⁶³

It is helpful to recall that Athanasius describes humanity in its prelapsarian or natural state as focused on the contemplation of God, enabling the body to repel or slow its decay. Antony likens the ascetic's task as the redirecting of one's soul to what it once was in the garden. Since the soul that has 'swerved' away from its natural state is a soul of vice, so also a soul that swerves back towards its original state is a soul of virtue: "if we abide as we have been made, we are in a state of virtue."⁶⁴ Thus Antony urges his followers continue seeking pure thoughts, since they have received the soul as 'a deposit.' He encourages his followers to preserve their souls for the Lord "that He may recognize His work as being the same as He made it."⁶⁵ Antony continues to encourage his fellow desert-dwellers to resist the temptations and appearances of the devil and his demons by continual fasting, sleeplessness, meekness, quietness, and piety towards Christ, asserting that the demons fear these disciplines.⁶⁶

After Antony's extended monologue, he again "increased in his discipline" and continually "pondered over the shortness of man's life."⁶⁷ Athanasius reports that

⁶² Athanasius, *Life* 20, 201, referring to Luke 17:21.

⁶³ Athanasius, *Life* 20, 201.

⁶⁴ Athanasius, *Life* 20, 201. Later on he attributes clear-sightedness to the soul in its natural state, surpassing the foretelling ability of the demons, *Life* 34, 205.

⁶⁵ Athanasius, *Life* 20, 201.

⁶⁶ Athanasius, *Life* 30, 204.

⁶⁷ Athanasius, *Life* 45, 208.

“he used to eat and sleep, and go about all other bodily necessities with shame when he thought of the spiritual faculties of the soul.”⁶⁸ Indeed, Athanasius records that Antony was very uncomfortable with eating in the presence of his brothers, choosing at times to eat by himself, or, if in the presence of his brothers, eating though “covered with shame . . . yet speaking boldly words of help.”⁶⁹ When the church was suffering under Maximinus’ persecution (303-311 CE) Athanasius asserts that Antony increased in his discipline still more. Antony visited the condemned Christians in Alexandria in order to contend with and minister to them, desirous to suffer martyrdom himself. Having been unsuccessful in this regard however, Antony withdrew to his cell “and was there daily a martyr to his conscience.”⁷⁰ Moreover, Athanasius notes that Antony’s “discipline was much severer.”⁷¹ This increased discipline involved a disregard for hygienic practices, including the donning of a hair shirt.

For he was ever fasting, and he had a garment of hair on the inside, while the outside was skin, which he kept until his end. And he neither bathed his body with water to free himself from filth, nor did he ever wash his feet, nor even endure so much as to put them into water, unless compelled by necessity.⁷²

Antony was ever vigilant against allowing the desire for food to cloud one’s mind and rule the passions, warning visiting monks not to be “deceived by the fulness of the belly.”⁷³

But he gave instructions for the care of the soul as well. He called for continual prayer, the singing of psalms, and careful attention to the works of the saints as recorded in Scripture, “that your souls being put in remembrance of the commandments may be brought into harmony with the zeal of the saints.”⁷⁴ Further suggestions regarding one’s soul involved creating an inventory of thoughts. Antony

⁶⁸ Athanasius, *Life* 45, 208.

⁶⁹ Athanasius, *Life* 45, 208.

⁷⁰ Athanasius, *Life* 47, 209.

⁷¹ Athanasius, *Life* 47, 209.

⁷² Athanasius, *Life* 47, 209.

⁷³ Athanasius, *Life* 55, 210.

⁷⁴ Athanasius, *Life* 55, 211.

suggested writing the thoughts, actions, and impulses of one's soul, imagining the resulting shame and embarrassment were such records displayed before fellow monks. "Wherefore let that which is written be to us in place of the eyes of our fellow hermits, that blushing as much to write as if we had been caught, we may never think of what is unseemly."⁷⁵ Thus, Antony was equally concerned with the care of one's own soul, whose care was inextricably intertwined with the disciplining of the body.

If Antony's life served as for Christians to follow, so too was his death: "for this end of his is worthy of imitation."⁷⁶ Even though Antony knew his death was near, he continued to exhort his followers to "live as though dying daily,"⁷⁷ and to "zealously guard the soul from foul thoughts."⁷⁸ Antony gave instructions to have his body buried in secret, fearful that it might be mummified and put on display in accordance with certain Egyptian funeral rites. He requested that his two assistants bury his body somewhere underground, as was the consistent manner of burial for the prophets and our Lord Jesus. For, "at the resurrection of the dead I shall receive it incorruptible from the Saviour."⁷⁹ Yet, there is evidence that Antony had already received a portion of the bodily incorruptibility on this earth. As previously mentioned, Antony announces that he is nearly "a hundred and five years old."⁸⁰ But even at such an extreme old age, Athanasius notes that his body

remained entirely free from harm. His eyes were undimmed and quite sound and he saw clearly; of his teeth he had not lost one, but they had become worn to the gums through the great age of the old man. He remained strong both in hands and feet; and while all men were using various foods, and washings and divers garments, he appeared more cheerful and of greater strength.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Athanasius, *Life* 55, 211.

⁷⁶ Athanasius, *Life* 89, 219.

⁷⁷ Athanasius, *Life* 89, 91, 219, 220 respectively.

⁷⁸ Athanasius, *Life* 89, 219.

⁷⁹ Athanasius, *Life* 91, 220.

⁸⁰ Athanasius, *Life* 89, 219.

⁸¹ Athanasius, *Life* 93, 221. It should be noted however, that Antony had also had two disciples attending him for the last fifteen years of his life, "on account of his age." *Life* 91, 220.

Even the manner of his death was exceedingly peaceful. Here there is a possible allusion to the death of Moses in Deuteronomy 34:7 as recorded in the Vulgate, where Moses' general physical well-being was still in tact at the age of 120, his teeth remaining 'unmoved'—*nec dentes illius moti sunt*.⁸² When Antony made his final visit to the monks in the outer mountain, announcing this visit as his last, Athanasius contrasts the sorrow of the monks—"they wept, embraced, and kissed the old man"—with the joy of Antony, who "as though sailing from a foreign city to his own, spoke joyously and exhorted them 'Not to grow idle in their labors . . .'"⁸³ Indeed, Athanasius describes the manner of Antony's death in biblical language befitting of the great patriarchs. Sensing that he was to "go the way of the fathers"⁸⁴ when death was imminent, "he lifted up his feet, and as though he saw friends coming to him and was glad because of them—for as he lay his countenance appeared joyful—he died and was gathered to the fathers."⁸⁵ Athanasius presents Antony as one worthy of imitation, whose victory over the demons and his own body proved a model for all Christians. Antony's flight into the desert and harsh ascetic regime allowed him to slowly remake his body and refine his soul, restoring it to its rightful place as governor of this newly formed body. Before a more extensive analysis of Antony's asceticism, I consider the letters written by Antony himself in an effort to more fully articulate Antony's ascetic regime.

Antony's Letters

In examining Antony's letters, I rely primarily on the translation work of Samuel Rubenson whose scholarship and attention to the Letters of Antony are unmatched. Rubenson offers key insights that will be gleaned throughout this section.⁸⁶ In

⁸² John Wilkinson, *The Bible and Healing: A Medical and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 35. Athanasius also records that Antony had two young assistants as he advanced in age.

⁸³ Athanasius, *Life* 89, 219.

⁸⁴ Athanasius, *Life* 91, 220. See Joshua 23:14; 1 Kings 2:2.

⁸⁵ Athanasius, *Life* 92, 220. There are parallels here between Athanasius' recording of Antony's death, and the idea of a 'natural death' put forward by the health reformer Nicholas de Condorcet.

⁸⁶ Samuel Rubenson has studied the letters of Antony in significant detail, and observes that most scholars today recognize Antony as the genuine author of these seven letters. See *Letters*, 36; especially 40, n. 1. See 36-42 for arguments supporting Antonian authorship.

Antony's letters, written to unnamed monks and fellow ascetics, one detects similar theological themes, indicating a reasonable degree of continuity between Athanasius' portrayal of Antony and the thoughts and teaching of Antony himself.⁸⁷ These theological commonalities are made most clearly in Antony's first letter, described as "a carefully planned treatise on repentance and purification."⁸⁸

What is immediately evident in Antony's letters is the emphasis on the Spirit of God. Antony rarely mentions the spirit of man. Rather, it is the Spirit of God who comes to the ascetic and instructs him in the course of repentance. In the first letter Antony describes the work of the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of repentance," on man's mind, soul, and body. The Spirit of repentance, says Antony, "sets for them a rule for how to repent in their bodies and souls," instructing those who wish to follow the way back to God, giving them "control over their souls and bodies in order that both may be sanctified and inherit together."⁸⁹ Echoing the theology of Athanasius, Antony proposes that the *telos* of such repentance is a return to the prelapsarian condition experienced by Adam in the garden whereby his bodily movements were guided by his soul, free from the intermingling of bodily desires afflicting it. It is this intermingling of bodily movements with the soul that must be rectified. Antony speaks of the three types of motions to which the human body is subject. The first movement is described as a "natural, inherent movement," and represents Adam's prelapsarian existence where the body is under complete control of the soul. This 'natural' bodily movement is one that "does not operate unless the soul consents."⁹⁰ The second movement however results from greed and the gluttonous stuffing of the body with food and drink, which effectively stirs up one's own body and induces one to further gluttony. The third movement, unlike the first two, comes from without,

⁸⁷ There are of course, key differences as well. See Rubenson, *Letters*, 132-144. Rubenson, *Letters*, 9-10, has observed that Athanasius' *Life of Antony* "reveal[s] more about Athanasius' hagiographical and theological intent than about Antony himself." Yet, he also acknowledges theological commonalities between these letters and Athanasius' *Life of Antony*. See *Letters*, 144.

⁸⁸ Rubenson, *Letters*, 52.

⁸⁹ Antony, Letter I: 20, 22, trans. by Rubenson in Rubenson, *Letters*, 198. All subsequent references to Letter I are from Rubenson's translation unless otherwise noted. An earlier English translation is available in Derwas J. Chitty, *The Letters of Anthony the Great*, trans. D. J. Chitty (Oxford: SLG Press, 1983).

⁹⁰ Antony, Letter I: 36, 199.

from evil spirits who attempt to hinder those who wish to sanctify themselves.⁹¹ Thus, “one is natural, one comes from too much to eat, the third is caused by the demons.”⁹² Armed with this knowledge of bodily movements, the Spirit teaches man to perform acts of repentance, whereby “the work of repentance becomes sweet for them.”⁹³

Antony describes the ascetic process of repentance whereby the mind, under control of the Spirit, instructs both body and soul. When the mind is under the Spirit’s guidance, it learns to “discriminate between them [body and soul] and begins to learn from the Spirit how to purify the body and the soul through repentance.”⁹⁴ Thus, the mind under the Spirit’s influence,

guides us in the actions of the body and soul, purifying both of them, separating the fruits of the flesh from what is natural to the body, in which they were mingled, and through which the transgression came to be, and leads each member of the body back to its original condition.⁹⁵

The goal of the ascetic regime set forth by Antony thus involves a purification of *both* the body and the soul, through the mind’s submission to the teaching of the Holy Spirit. Antony asserts that it is only when the mind is under the Spirit’s guidance that the mind can effectively discriminate between body and soul, enabling one to sanctify one’s bodily members. The first step in the process involves a purification of the body by fasting, vigils and prayers.⁹⁶ Later Antony repeats this exhortation, adding “much study of the Word of God.”⁹⁷ As a result of these exercises, observes Antony, “the body is thus brought under the authority of the mind and is taught by the Spirit, as the words of Paul testify: *I castigate my body and bring it into subjection.*”⁹⁸ Thus, when one engages in fasting and prayer through the

⁹¹ Antony, Letter I: 41, 199.

⁹² *Apophthegmata Patrum* [hereafter *AP*], Antony 22, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cisterian Publications, 1975), 6. For an introduction to the *AP*, see Harmless, *Desert Christians*, chs. 6-8; Rubenson, *Letters*, 144-152.

⁹³ Antony, Letter I: 19, 198.

⁹⁴ Antony, Letter I: 27, 199.

⁹⁵ Antony, Letter I: 28-30, 199.

⁹⁶ Antony, Letter I: 28-30, 199.

⁹⁷ Antony, Letter I: 77, 202.

⁹⁸ Antony, Letter I: 32, 199, quoting 1 Corinthians 9:27. Antony quotes this verse again in line 40.

Spirit's aid, one receives help in purifying the members of one's body, bringing one's members under the authority of the Spirit-led mind. For when the mind accepts this struggle between body and soul, the Spirit develops "a loving partnership" with the mind, because the mind "keeps the commandments which the Spirit has delivered."⁹⁹

Antony continues by describing how the Spirit sets 'rules' of purification for one's bodily members: the eyes, ears, tongue, hands, belly, genitals and feet. Though there is no elaboration on what these rules are or how they are enacted, the goal is that "the whole body may be changed and placed under the authority of the Spirit."¹⁰⁰

Through such exercises, says Antony, the body begins to take on the nature of our spiritual body at the resurrection.¹⁰¹ The Spirit however, does more than help the mind to purify the body, but also helps the mind purify one's soul:

And the Spirit teaches the mind how to heal all the wounds of the soul, and to rid itself of every one, those which are mingled in the members of the body, and other passions which are altogether outside the body, being mingled in the will.¹⁰²

Antony concludes the letter with an acknowledgement that the Spirit also instructs the soul itself with its particular afflictions unique to it—pride, hatred, impatience, etc. In the practice of all of these disciplines God has mercy on the soul and the body, giving aid to both.

Thus, both Athanasius and Antony speak of the disorder of humanity as one of an improper relationship between body and soul. This however, can be rectified, in part through fasting and bodily discipline. While Antony himself places a stronger emphasis on the Holy Spirit's guidance or the 'Spirit of Repentance,' Athanasius' treatment is more christological. Yet both believe that it is possible to return to one's 'natural state,' as defined by the proper ordering of body and soul, where the soul rules over the body. While Antony does not make explicit claims that a return to the

⁹⁹ Chitty, *Letters of Antony*, 3; Antony, Letter I: 44.

¹⁰⁰ Antony, Letter I: 70, 201.

¹⁰¹ Antony, Letter I: 71, 201-202.

¹⁰² Chitty, *Letters of Antony*, 3; Antony, Letter I: 49.

‘natural state’ involves bodily incorruption, for Athanasius it is a notable theme. Indeed, his *Life of Antony* becomes the very example of the bodily incorruptibility possible when one engages in fasting in the proper re-ordering of body and soul. For not only was Antony able to conquer demons and disease, he was able to conquer *himself* and the desires stemming from his body. According to Athanasius, Antony was able to put on that bodily incorruption made possible by the death and resurrection of Christ through fasting and harsh treatment of the body.

Having observed these commonalities however, there are several points worthy of further discussion. Though an ascetic regime which involves fasting, sexual abstinence, and vigils was seen as a way to return to one’s natural state, a state for Athanasius that involved a heightened degree of incorruptibility, the Platonic and Neo-Platonic themes in both sources raise concerns as to whether these are not really dualist accounts of humanity in Christian guise, given the exhortations for harsh treatment of the body. It is appropriate then to question whether, or to what extent, Athanasius and Antony uncritically appropriate Gnostic, Manichaean, or Neo-Platonic thought, and where they differ, given especially the philosophical milieu of Alexandria at this time. Athanasius’ ascetic program was developed in close historical, geographical, cultural, and philosophical proximity to other forms of discipline rooted in views of the body, which, while similar to those of Athanasius, were nevertheless more pessimistic. Therefore, a brief consideration of these competing philosophies are in order.

Embodiment in the Philosophical Milieu

Gnosticism

Gnosticism represents an extremely dualistic, highly syncretistic religious movement espousing salvation through revelatory knowledge (**gnwsi**"), which proved attractive enough to be assimilated by some Christians even as it was simultaneously attacked by others, most notably the Church Fathers Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ For an English translation of the recently discovered Gnostic texts, see *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1977), and *The Secret Sayings of Jesus*, ed. Robert M. Grant and D. M. Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960). For secondary

While there are numerous strands of Gnostic thought, asceticism is a common theme, and warrants an investigation of these practices in order to draw critical distinctions between the asceticism espoused by Athanasius, and the asceticism common to Gnostic thought in general, as such practices—including especially the purposes for which these practices were instituted—were situated within radically divergent worldviews.

While the god of Gnosticism is utterly acosmic and transcendent, he is nevertheless described as Light, Father, Life, Spirit, or the Good. This god however, did not create the earth. Rather, the earth is the creation of an evil, tyrannical, ambitious Demiurge, whose existence is the result of a ‘fall’ within the *pleroma*, the divine realm composed of graded hypostases of the Father. There is thus a sharp dualism between this world and the Father. As the earth is thus a dungeon of sorts, so too is the human body, which is composed of a material body and soul which serve as a prison for a portion of divine substance, spirit (**pneuma**). This move is typically attributed to the deliberate actions of the Demiurge and his seven archons as a way to keep a portion of the divine captive on earth.¹⁰⁴

Gnosticism in general teaches the striving for knowledge based upon revelation by which man may release the spirit from the fetters of body and soul, and return to the Father. Those who are privileged with this knowledge (the pneumatics) have learned therefore to cultivate contempt for this world, fashioned as it is by an evil Demiurge, including their own bodies, given that the divine spark within, spirit, is held captive by the body. In *The Book of Thomas the Contender* the savior proclaims, “Woe to you (pl.) who hope in the flesh and in the prison that will perish . . . Woe to you,

sources in Gnosticism, see Ferdinand C. Baur, *Die christliche Gnosis, oder, die christliche Religionsphilosophie in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Tübingen: C. F. Osiander, 1835); Charles W. King, *The Gnostics and Their Remains: Ancient and Mediaeval*, 2nd ed. (London: D. Nutt, 1887); Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism: An Anthology* (London: Collins, 1961), *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1963); Robert McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem: A Study of the Relations between Hellenistic Judaism and the Gnostic Heresy* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1958).

¹⁰⁴ In some versions of Gnosticism, the presence of this divine substance or ‘spark’ is attributed to the Demiurge himself, in others, it is attributed the higher powers in the *pleroma*, who secretly implant this ‘seed’ in humankind as a means to secure salvation.

captives, for you are bound in caverns!”¹⁰⁵ This hostile attitude toward the body resulted in two responses: libertinism and asceticism. The former indulged the body as a paradoxical form of salvation where the soul deliberately opposed the Demiurge in recognizing that true spirit is unaffected by the actions of the body, while the latter sought to ‘disengage’ the inner person from the body as much as possible by abstaining from those practices to which humans are given to excess—eating and sex. *The Book of Thomas* represents one extreme example of asceticism in the promulgation of celibacy. Here the savior issues condemnations against those who “love intimacy with womankind and polluted intercourse with them,” including those generally “in the grip of the powers of your body.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, adherents were encouraged to treat the body harshly so that the soul might make its ascent back to the Father.

Watch and pray that you (pl.) not come to be in the flesh, but rather that you come forth from the bondage of the bitterness of this life. . . . For when you come forth from the suffering and passions of the body, you will receive rest from the good one, and you will reign with the king, you joined with him and he with you, from now on, for ever and ever.¹⁰⁷

Harsh treatment of the body however must not be overstated. Near the end of *The Gospel of Truth*, adherents are encouraged to impart spiritual knowledge while also attending to the seeker’s bodily needs:

Speak of the truth with those who search for it and (of) knowledge to those who have committed sin in their error. Make firm the foot of those who have stumbled and stretch out your hands to those who are ill. Feed those who are hungry and give repose to those who are weary, and raise up those who wish to rise, and awaken those who sleep.¹⁰⁸

Nevertheless, salvation is a highly self-referential, inward journey which seeks to distance the body from the soul as much as possible, where one gradually comes to know the true value of one’s soul in ascending to the divine.

¹⁰⁵ *The Book of Thomas the Contender* 143.11, 16, trans. John D. Turner, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, 205.

¹⁰⁶ *Thomas the Contender* 144.10-15, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, 206.

¹⁰⁷ *Thomas the Contender* 144.10-16, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, 207.

¹⁰⁸ *Gospel of Truth* I.32.35-33.11, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, 47.

Manichaeism

Manichaeism incorporated elements of Zoroastrianism and Buddhism in teaching a dualism of good and evil in the coeternal primal principles of Light and Darkness, presenting a cosmology and doctrine that proved influential for several Christians, including the younger Augustine. The founder Mani (216-277 CE), born in southern Mesopotamia, believed that particles of light were trapped in the human body as a result of the creative powers of the demonic forces associated with Darkness. When Darkness encountered Light, it not only ‘consumed’ light, but also “felt, touched, ate, sucked, tasted, and swallowed it.”¹⁰⁹ This primordial conflict has ‘given birth’ to a mixed substance of both good and evil out of which everything else derives. Human bodies are thus a battleground for good and evil; the human soul consists of divine ‘fragments’ of light, trapped in and susceptible to the affections of material bodies. Jesus, sent by Light, appeared to Adam in order to reveal the true nature of his being, that of all humankind is composed of fragments of divine light trapped in bodies of matter. Revealed to Adam was Jesus’

own self exposed to all, (to) teeth of panthers, the teeth of elephants, devoured by the devourers, consumed by the consumers, eaten by the dogs, mingled with and imprisoned in everything that exists, shackled in the stench of darkness.¹¹⁰

Through this revelation Adam learns that there is a divine substance of light trapped in material bodies, and how to rectify this situation.

Adherents were thus enlisted in ascetic practices to free these trapped particles of light in evil matter, practices which included abstinence from particular foods and marriage. The Elect were required to seven days each month, and abstained from any ‘ensouled’ food, eating only certain vegetables to avoid any injury to the light

¹⁰⁹ Ephrem, *Hypatius*, in C. W. S. Mitchell, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan*, vol. 1 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912), xlv.

¹¹⁰ Theodore bar Konai, *Scholia*, in A. V. W. Jackson, *Researches in Manichaeism with Special Reference to the Turfan Fragments* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 252-253.

entrapped within.¹¹¹ They were also forbidden from marriage and procreation, as the propagation of the species only protracted the drama of salvation, further dispersing particles of light.

It is clear however—at least according to Augustine’s account of Manichaeian practices—that the *type* of fasting encouraged by Mani differed from the fasting exhorted by Athanasius in that the former restricted the type of food, and not necessarily the quantity, while the latter tended to focus more on the quantity of food. Augustine was sharply critical of these Manichaeian strictures for the abuse to which they might be put; in particular, he implied that one could very well engage in gluttony—so long as the right kind of food was consumed—rather than eating any kind of food, so long as it is ‘just enough.’¹¹² It has been noted however that the concern in Manichaeian practice was to separate the good from the evil—the soul from the body—which was an internal process.¹¹³ Since the body is a composite of good and evil, the purity must be internal. Hence, the restrictions on certain kinds of food for the light contained therein. It has been rightly noted that in Manichaeian thought, “the human body stands at the intersection of good and evil, containing the richest concentrations of both substances, each attempting to gain ascendancy over the other.”¹¹⁴ Thus, while it might appear that the body for Mani is a ‘hopeless case,’ it has been pointed out that the practices of Manichaeism are designed to effect a *separation* of the opposing forces in one’s body, a “reconstitution of the defective body by the separation of its antagonistic components.”¹¹⁵ While fasting on the one hand reduced the influence of dark powers in the body, it was also recognized that

¹¹¹ According to Augustine, the Manichaeians allowed eating plants and vegetables, but prohibited eating any meat as it defiles the one eating it, *On the Morals of the Manichaeians* XV.36-37, in *NPNF* First Series, vol. 4, 79.

¹¹² *Morals of the Manichaeians* XIV.35, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 4, 79.

¹¹³ Jorunn J. Buckley, “Tools and Tasks—Elchasaite and Manichaeian Purification Rituals,” *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986): 399-411.

¹¹⁴ BeDuhn, *Manichaeian Body*, 88.

¹¹⁵ BeDuhn, *Manichaeian Body*, 99; 121. BeDuhn notes that the separation theme is readily apparent in the *Sermon on the Light Nous*, which has survived in Middle Iranian, Turkic, Chinese (*Ts’an-ching*), and Coptic (*Kephalaion* 38).

food was necessary to sustain and nourish the body, enabling the Elect and the auditors to engage in meditation and prayer.¹¹⁶

While the cosmologies and cosmogonies of Gnostic and Manichaean thought differ somewhat, both encourage ascetic practices based upon a negative construal of nature of the material order, created as it is by some malevolent force. Abstinence from food and sex as moral practices were thoroughly rooted in the metaphysical, and were encouraged not for the love and good of the body itself, but because the body was specially created as a ‘tomb’ for the divine substance, whether spirit or light.

Much closer, are the parallels between Athanasius’ theology and Plotinus’ interpretation of Platonic thought. Given however that Plotinus’ philosophy was largely an attempt to understand and clarify Plato, it is important to have some understanding of Platonic doctrine regarding the nature of the body and soul before turning to Plotinus as an example of a neo-Platonic understanding of Plato.

Plato (427-327 BCE)

If one were to read Plato’s discussions of the immortality of the soul according to Socrates in *Phaedo*, it would appear that the body’s constant battle against the soul renders the former of little use, and perhaps even evil. For Plato occasionally speaks of the soul’s relationship to the body in Pythagorean terms where the body (**swma**) is the tomb (**shma**) of the preexistent, immortal soul.¹¹⁷ Indeed, death is often spoken of as the soul’s release from the body.¹¹⁸ In *Phaedo*, Socrates asserts that the philosopher is to free his soul from the association of the body as much as possible, as the soul can better apprehend the world of Forms when unencumbered by the body.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ BeDuhn, *Manichaean Body*, 102.

¹¹⁷ See also *Cratylus* 400c; *Gorgias* 493a; *Phaedrus* 250c

¹¹⁸ *Gorgias* 524b; *Phaedo* 64c, 67d; *Timaeus* 81d-82.

¹¹⁹ *Phaedo* 64c-67d, 72e-77d, 80a-84a, 102d-107b

If we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape the body and observe things in themselves with the soul itself. . . . While we live, we shall be closest to knowledge if we refrain as much as possible from association with the body and do not join with it more than we must, . . . in this way we will escape the contamination of the body's folly.¹²⁰

It must be remembered however that the world of sensible, visible things—the human body included—is portrayed in a negative light primarily in the context of discussing the ascent of the soul.¹²¹ The soul is more fully real than the decaying body, even though, unlike the world of Forms, it too undergoes changes.¹²² Elsewhere however, Plato presents a different picture of the body and soul.

In *Timaeus* for instance, the universe (**kosmos**) is created by the demiurge or divine craftsman, who modeled the world after the pattern of the changeless, eternal Forms by using preexistent matter, ‘taking over’ the visible elements and bringing order out of chaos.¹²³ All of creation—including the human body—is unmistakably beautiful and good.¹²⁴ Human beings were fashioned from preexistent matter with body and soul. Lest however, human beings have too much of the divine, the demiurge began sowing the seed of an immortal, incorporeal (**ajswmato**), rational soul (**tol logistikon**) of man before assigning the gods the task of completing man's creation, including the mortal soul, divided into the irascible soul (**tol qumikon**) seated in the heart, governing things like anger and courage, and the concupiscible soul (**tolepiqumhtikon**) near the liver, dealing with sexual and nutritive desires, including generation.¹²⁵ Here Plato alludes to the notion of the soul's ascent so prevalent in *Phaedo*, speaking of the rational soul as God's special ‘guardian spirit’ or ‘genius’ (**daimona**), “that kind of soul which is housed in the top of our body and raises us—seeing that we are not an earthly but a heavenly plant—up from earth

¹²⁰ *Phaedo* 66e-67a, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 58.

¹²¹ See also *Phaedrus* 246c-e where the soul descends by ‘shedding its wings’ from the world of forms, descending into material bodies.

¹²² *Sophist* 249a

¹²³ *Timaeus* 28a-32c, 52d, 53b

¹²⁴ *Timaeus* 29a-30b, 34c-36e, 92c

¹²⁵ *Timaeus* 41c-d, 69b-72d, 89e; *Republic* 4.435-442

toward our kindred in the heaven.”¹²⁶ Plato likens this rational, immortal soul to a charioteer who guides and governs the two lower parts of the soul as horses, the irascible soul guided by verbal commands, the concupiscible soul guided by whip and goad.¹²⁷ Thus, in beholding a beautiful boy, the rational soul must pull back on the reigns of both horses who desire to have sex with him—the irascible soul obeying, the concupiscible soul hurling insults at the rational soul—until the boy’s beauty may be properly beheld with reverence and awe.¹²⁸

Plato goes on to describe the creation of the rest of the human body, suggesting at various points that the body and soul share some kind of relationship where one may affect the other. Knowing for example, that gluttony would both hinder the pursuit of philosophy and harm the body, the gods fashioned the ‘lower abdomen’ to store excess food and drink, lest man hasten his demise.¹²⁹ Indeed, bodies themselves are susceptible to disease, and such diseases of the body can affect the soul. Those which pose the gravest danger to the soul are ‘excessive pleasures and pains.’ For instance, sexual overindulgence can be traced to the ‘stuff’ which flows in the body on account of the porousness of the bones.¹³⁰ People should not be reproached for this, says Plato, for no one is willfully evil. On the contrary, “the wicked man becomes wicked by reason of some evil condition of body and unskilled nurture.”¹³¹

When considering the ‘living creature’ understood as “that compound of soul and body,” Plato stresses a healthy proportionality between body and soul.¹³² A soul too powerful for the body can ‘churn’ or ‘set fire’ to the body, tricking doctors into misdiagnoses, while a body too strong for the soul renders the higher functions of the

¹²⁶ *Timaeus* 90a, in *Plato: Timaeus, Critias, Cleithophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, ed. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 245.

¹²⁷ *Phaedrus* 253c-254e

¹²⁸ *Phaedrus* 254-256b, also 249a

¹²⁹ *Timaeus* 73a

¹³⁰ *Timaeus* 86b-e; *Republic* 9.571d; *Sophist* 228a; *Laws* 3.689a ff.

¹³¹ *Timaeus* 86e

¹³² *Timaeus* 88a-c, in *Plato*, 239.

soul dull, stupid, and forgetful, leading to the most serious disease of all: ignorance.¹³³ Thus, Plato warns that one avoid both extremes.

From both these evils the one means of salvation is this—neither to exercise the soul without the body nor the body without the soul, so that they may be evenly matched and in sound health.¹³⁴

Thus, Plato hardly sounds suspicious of the body. In *Gorgias* Plato's Socrates asserts that gymnastics and medicine are 'mistresses' over other professions in the city like the making of bread, pastries, and wine, for these professions serve the appetite only, while the former best serve bodily excellence through discipline.¹³⁵ While Plato considers it a disgrace to require medical attention on account of inactivity,¹³⁶ medicine is good if it quickly cures the diseased body, thereby enabling *polis*-dwellers to fulfill their roles.¹³⁷ But Plato also warns against an exaggerated concern for the body because it might interrupt the pursuit of virtue; such concern makes a man "always fancy himself sick and never cease from anguishing about the body."¹³⁸ Thus, the wise person will engage in learning which benefits the *soul*, since its welfare is more important than that of the body. In giving attention to his body it is not for the well-being of the body alone, but for self-discipline: "As he tunes the harmony in his body, it is clear that what he has in mind will always be the concord in his soul."¹³⁹ In considering the importance of physical education in bringing up young men to serve in the republic, Plato asserts that a good soul benefits the body more than a good body benefits the soul:

¹³³ *Timaeus* 87c-88c. The wrong kind of food hinders the body, and the soul's capacity for thought and self-control, *Republic* 8.559b-c.

¹³⁴ *Timaeus* 88b, in *Plato*, 241; *Republic* 4.442a. Better is the fortunate individual who has a beautiful soul and an equally beautiful body, *Republic* 3.402d.

¹³⁵ *Gorgias* 517e-519b

¹³⁶ *Republic* 3.405d

¹³⁷ *Republic* 3.403c-407b; *Timaeus* 89b-c

¹³⁸ *The Republic* 3.407b, in *Plato: The Republic in Two Volumes*, vol. 1, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946), 279. Plato was critical of the hypochondriac Herodicus who was a 'slave to disease,' *Republic* 3.406b; 4.425e-426b.

¹³⁹ *The Republic* 9.591d, in *Plato: The Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 311.

It's my opinion that if the body is in good shape, it does not by its own excellence make the soul good. On the other hand, a good soul *can* by its own excellence make a body as good as it is capable of being.¹⁴⁰

Despite the tensions in Plato's understanding of the human body and its relationship to the soul, between the body and soul as good creation on the one hand, and the body as a hindrance to the soul's ascent to the divine on the other, he is comfortable in speaking of both the human person as a 'composite' of body and soul, and the *goodness* of this relationship, even if something better awaits. While the soul has preeminence, one should neither 'leave the body behind' in the pursuit of wisdom, nor direct inordinate attention to it by either harsh asceticism or overindulgence, but rather consider the exercising of *both* in becoming the type of person worthy of citizenship in the *polis*.

Neo-Platonism

Plotinus (204-270 CE) considered himself a faithful interpreter of Plato, and sought to clarify some of his more opaque teachings regarding the nature of, and relationship between, body and soul. Plotinus reflects on his understanding of the body and soul in relation to the two worlds in Plato's doctrine—the immaterial world of forms and the world of sense—arguing that the soul is not the body, defending the Platonic doctrine of the soul's immortality against Aristotelian entelechy, and the soul's corporeality as presented in Epicurean and Stoic thought.¹⁴¹ Following Plato, Plotinus affirms that man is composed of a temporal body and an immortal soul.¹⁴² Soul gives life to the body, is responsible for the growth and nutritive functions of the body, and is also capable of thought, memories, and imagination.¹⁴³ While the soul cannot desert the body until death where the body deserts the soul, the soul nevertheless does not depend on the body for existence.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ *Republic* 3.403d, in *Plato: The Republic*, 94. Good physicians use the mind to treat the body, *Republic* 3.408e

¹⁴¹ Plotinus, *Ennead* IV.7.8⁴-8⁵

¹⁴² *Ennead* IV.7.1.4-6

¹⁴³ *Ennead* IV.7.5

¹⁴⁴ *Ennead* I.9.1

Plotinus however, turns Platonic doctrine on its head, by asserting that there can be no body without the soul. This formulation has derived in part from Plotinus' difficulty in reconciling the unity of the Forms (e.g. beauty) with the plurality of sensible objects as presented in Plato's *Parmenides* (a doctrine also rejected by Aristotle [*Metaphysics* 1.6]).¹⁴⁵ To ask whether or not the human body has a soul is to ask the wrong question, for the soul is not in the body. Rather, *the body is in the soul* in the sense that the body is dependent on the soul. Indeed, the soul "does not belong to the body, but the body belongs to it."¹⁴⁶ Moreover,

Nothing is without a share of soul. It is as if a net immersed in the waters was alive, but unable to make its own that in which it is. . . . And soul's nature is so great, just because it has no size, as to contain the whole of the body in one and the same grasp; wherever body extends, there soul is. If body did not exist, it would make no difference to soul as regards size, for it is what it is.¹⁴⁷

This claim becomes more intelligible (somewhat) by considering Plotinus' cosmology.

According to Plotinus, soul is the 'lowest' of the three divine hypostases which comprise all that exists.¹⁴⁸ All that exists emanates (or derives) from the ineffably good, yet unknowable, unchanging, utterly transcendent One, beyond being and all predication.¹⁴⁹ The One emanates Intellect or Mind (**to**no^u"), which is one step removed from complete singularity. Intellect "is not only one, but one and many," roughly corresponding to Plato's world of ideas.¹⁵⁰ Finally, just as Intellect derives from the One, so too Soul derives from the Intellect.¹⁵¹ In Soul there is still more multiplicity in unity. Here Plotinus makes a distinction between world-soul (or All-

¹⁴⁵ *Ennead* VI.4-5. See also Plato, *Parmenides* 131a-c; Dominic J. O'Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23.

¹⁴⁶ *Ennead* IV.8.2.46-48, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 405.

¹⁴⁷ *Ennead* IV.3.9.36-45, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 65.

¹⁴⁸ *Ennead* V.1

¹⁴⁹ *Ennead* VI.9.3-4; VI.8.8; VI.9.4.11

¹⁵⁰ *Ennead* IV.8.3.11, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 407; *Ennead* V.1.6-7; V.4

¹⁵¹ *Ennead* V.2.1.14-18

soul), from which the universe, “the All” (**talpan**) emanates, and individual souls from which human bodies are derived, even while affirming the unity of Soul.¹⁵² Soul is “indivisibly divided.” It is critical however, to recognize here that Plotinus speaks of the activities of the soul with respect to all bodies in *both* positive and pessimistic terms, as Plotinus is all too often accused of disparaging or devaluing the human body in relation to ‘higher realities.’

On the one hand, Plotinus speaks of Soul giving rise to the universe—often described as “a single mighty living being”¹⁵³—as a perfectly natural occurrence, a universe which includes individual living bodies, both human and animal. Here, each soul’s ‘descent’ is described as a result of a ‘natural principle.’ Each soul

comes down to a body made ready for it according to its resemblance to the soul’s disposition. It is carried there to that to which it is made like, one soul to a human being and others to different kind of animals. The inescapable rule and the justice [which govern the descent of souls] are thus set in a natural principle which compels each to go in its proper order to that to which it individually tends. . . . There is no need of anyone to send it or bring it into body at a particular time, or into this or that particular body, but when its moment comes to it it descends and enters where it must as if of its own accord.¹⁵⁴

Shortly thereafter Plotinus describes the soul’s descent as a natural ‘spontaneous’ jumping or as a natural, passionate desire for a sexual union.¹⁵⁵ Since Soul derives from Intellect and ultimately the One, there is beauty and goodness and order in the universe as an archetype of the Intellect, for there is no evil in Intellect.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, there really is no ‘descent’ or fall of the soul into bodies, for in reality, all three hypostases—Soul, Intellect, and the One—*are in us*. “And just as in nature there are these three of which we have spoken, so we ought to think that they are present also in ourselves.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² *Ennead* IV.7.12

¹⁵³ *Ennead* IV.4.11

¹⁵⁴ *Ennead* IV.4.12.36-39; 13.1-10 in *Plotinus*, vol. 4, 76-77.

¹⁵⁵ *Ennead* IV.3.13.20-24

¹⁵⁶ *Ennead* V.9.10

¹⁵⁷ *Ennead* V.1.10.5-7, in *Plotinus: Ennead V*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 47.

However, Plotinus also speaks of the emanation of human bodies from soul in negative terms, as a “falling away.”¹⁵⁸ While individual souls have an impulse to return to Intellect from which they came, “they also possess a power directed to the world here below.”¹⁵⁹ After a short autobiographical account of ‘out of body’ experiences enabling him to behold “a beauty wonderfully great,” he describes the Soul’s motion toward bodies in a tract entitled ‘The Descent of the Soul into Bodies.’¹⁶⁰ In this account the ‘lower part’ of Soul gives rise to bodies in its desire to ‘break away’ in isolation from Intellect and the desire to govern, becoming immersed in bodies. Here, Plotinus employs Plato’s metaphor of the ‘molting soul’ in *Phaedrus* (246c). Such souls

change from the whole to being a part and belonging to themselves, and, as if they were tired of being together, they each go to their own. Now when a soul does this for a long time, flying from the All and standing apart in distinctness, and does not look towards the intelligible, it has become a part and is isolated and weak and fusses and looks towards a part and in its separation from the whole it embarks on one single thing and flies from everything else; . . . it has left the whole and directs the individual part with great difficulty; it is by now applying itself to and caring for things outside and is present and sinks deep into the individual part.¹⁶¹

While the ‘fallen’ soul is now “in the fetters of the body” (**ἐν δεσμοῖς τοῖς τῶν σωματῶν**), it nevertheless remains transcendent, and to some degree invulnerable to change. This is because “even our soul does not altogether come down, but there is always something of it in the intelligible.”¹⁶²

When these accounts of soul and the bodies Soul engenders are taken together, Porphyry’s suggestion that Plotinus seemed ‘ashamed’ at being in the body, much less Emperor Julian’s ‘Neo-Platonic’ admonition to pursue the activities of the soul

¹⁵⁸ Plotinus does however speak of the emanation of Intellect from the One in similarly disparaging terms, *Ennead* VI.5.1.29.

¹⁵⁹ *Ennead* IV.8.4.1-5, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 407-409.

¹⁶⁰ *Ennead* IV.8.1 ff.

¹⁶¹ *Ennead* IV.8.4.13-22, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 409; *Ennead* V.1.1

¹⁶² *Ennead* IV.8.8.3-6, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 421; *Ennead* II.9.2

and to consider the body “more worthless than dirt,” are suspect.¹⁶³ Certainly, to speak of the body as only a fetter of the soul is to ignore Plotinus’ frequent mention of the universe—including human bodies—as a ‘unitary living being’ reflecting Intellect in which there is no evil. While Plotinus speaks of the body as a fetter to the soul, the body *itself* is not evil. On the contrary, Plotinus equates unformed *matter* (**ul h**) in the world of sense with primary evil (**kakon**), understood as the privation of the good, absolute negativity, or ‘non-being,’ though not in an absolute sense.¹⁶⁴ Thus, the body (**swma**) is not ‘evil’ *per se*, but only to the extent that it participates in matter that is resistant to form.¹⁶⁵ While human bodies are the result of form coming to matter, nevertheless

bodies have a sort of form which is not true form, and they are deprived of life, and in their disorderly motion they destroy each other, and hinder the soul in its proper activity, . . . being secondary evil.¹⁶⁶

Bodies then are evil to the extent that matter does not take on form—“ugliness is matter not mastered by form.”¹⁶⁷ Yet, Plotinus urges us not to despise undefined, ‘shapeless’ matter precisely because it is the very ‘stuff’ with which Intellect works (through Soul), bringing form in its wake:

We must say that we should not in every case despise the undefined or anything of which the very idea implies shapelessness, if it is going to offer itself to the principles before it and to the best of beings.¹⁶⁸

Matter is needed for beings that come into existence. Matter, “makes the greatest contribution to the formation of bodies.”¹⁶⁹ It must be this way, for matter exists in

¹⁶³ Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books* 1, in *Plotinus: Porphyry on Plotinus, Ennead I*, trans. A. H. Armstrong and Paul Henry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 3; Julian, *Orations* 7.226c, in *Julian: Orations 6-8, Letters to Themistius, To the Senate and the People of Athens, To a Priest, The Caesars, Misopogon*, ed. Wilmer Cave Wright (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 129.

¹⁶⁴ *Ennead* IV.8.1-8.3; II.4.14; 4.16

¹⁶⁵ *Ennead* I.8.4.1-2; 8.3.6-10, 33-36

¹⁶⁶ *Ennead* I.8.4.2-6, in *Plotinus: Ennead I*, 287; *Ennead* II.4.2.11-12.

¹⁶⁷ *Ennead* I.8.5.24-25, in *Plotinus: Ennead I*, 291; I.8.8.20-30; II.4.16.16-25. See also O’Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction*, 82.

¹⁶⁸ *Ennead* II.4.3.1-4, in *Plotinus: Ennead II*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 109-110. See also Miles, *Plotinus on Body and Beauty* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 94.

¹⁶⁹ *Ennead* II.4.12.1-2, in *Plotinus: Ennead II*, 135.

the Intellect, which is utterly devoid of evil, though in Intellect matter is without dimension or size.¹⁷⁰

Given Plotinus' basic understanding of body and soul, he give two reasons why the "soul's fellowship [**koinwnia**] with the body is displeasing."¹⁷¹ First, the body hinders thought or contemplation. The soul is damaged in its 'reasoning part' since it is 'fused with matter,' thereby focusing on *becoming* (e.g. this world) rather than *being* (Intellect).

But if the part [of the soul] which is in the world of sense-perception gets control, and thrown into confusion [by the body], it prevents us from perceiving the things which the upper part of the soul contemplates.¹⁷²

Secondly, the body of sense experience stimulates passions which fill the soul with "pleasures, desires, and grief."¹⁷³ The soul then becomes 'ugly,' loving vice, becoming full of lust, and "living a life which consists of bodily sensations," thereby "no longer seeing what a soul ought to see."¹⁷⁴ Plotinus speaks of the ugly soul as "getting muddy" by involving itself in 'alien matter,' "by mixture and dilution and inclination towards the body and matter," while the perfect soul directs itself toward Intellect.¹⁷⁵

Plotinus insists however, that "the whole soul perceives the affection in the body without being affected by it."¹⁷⁶ He rejects any Stoic doctrine of striving for *apatheia* in one's soul. "Why, then, ought we to seek to make the soul free from affections [**apaqh**] by means of philosophy when it is not affected to begin with?"¹⁷⁷ Plotinus attempts to defend this premise by positing a distinction between activity and

¹⁷⁰ *Ennead* II.4.1; 4.2-4.4, 4.8, 4.12

¹⁷¹ *Ennead* IV.8.2.42-45, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 405.

¹⁷² *Ennead* IV.8.8.2-6, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 421.

¹⁷³ *Ennead* IV.8.2.44-45, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 405.

¹⁷⁴ *Ennead* I.6.5.26-36, in *Plotinus: Ennead I*, 247. Indeed, different souls look at different things, becoming what they look at, *Ennead* IV.9.3.

¹⁷⁵ *Ennead* I.6.5.45-50, in *Plotinus: Ennead I*, 249; *Ennead* I.4.4.27-31

¹⁷⁶ *Ennead* IV.4.19.13, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 187.

¹⁷⁷ *Ennead* III.6.5.1-2

affection; while the soul can both conduct an activity and be affected without changing, the body can't be affected without changing. He asserts that "sense perceptions" (**taĩ aĩsqhsei**) are 'activities' (**eĩergeia**) or 'judgments' of the higher part of the soul, while affections (**taĩpaqhmata**) like grief, anger, pleasure, or desire, are activities the lower part of the soul.¹⁷⁸ In either case, the soul does not entail any change in carrying out these functions, even as the body undergoes change. Thus, while the soul causes the body to move and grow (and hence, change), the soul *itself* remains free from change in its activity (**eĩergeia**).¹⁷⁹ Similarly, while the lower part of the soul may form an 'opinion' on an approaching evil giving rise to fear in the soul, the soul nevertheless forms this 'opinion' without changing; the accompanying bodily response—'disturbance and shock'—is also strictly limited to the body.¹⁸⁰

Moreover, contra Stoicism, Plotinus asserts that if the soul were affected by the body it would need to be present "in every part of the body." One must remember that soul transcends body, "for every soul has something of what is below, in the direction of the body, and of what is above, in the direction of the Intellect."¹⁸¹ Yet, the individual soul *can benefit* by 'plunging into' the body, insofar as an experience of evil gives clearer knowledge of the Good.¹⁸² Nevertheless, this benefit—even if it can be spoken of as moving the soul from vice to virtue—cannot be properly described as change.¹⁸³

The soul however also cares for the body; all Soul cares for that which is not Soul. Plotinus likens the embodied soul as caretaker or gardener to a plant (e.g. the body), "concerned about the maggots in the plant and anxiously caring for it."¹⁸⁴ He

¹⁷⁸ *Ennead* III.6.1; 6.3; 6.4

¹⁷⁹ *Ennead* III.6.4.38-42

¹⁸⁰ *Ennead* III.6.4

¹⁸¹ *Ennead* IV.8.8.13-14, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 421; *Ennead* II.9.2.5-10

¹⁸² *Ennead* IV.8.7. The soul must seek the One through Intellect, lest it face a transmigratory existence, *Ennead* III.2.13.11-15; III.4.2. Plotinus states that the rapist will be reborn a woman to be raped.

¹⁸³ *Ennead* III.6.2. Nor does the soul does change in moving from virtue to vice.

¹⁸⁴ *Ennead* IV.3.4.31-32, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 47.

contrasts a Gnostic understanding of the nature of things (or, Gnosticism as understood by Plotinus), whereby “men fly from the body since they hate it from a distance,” from his view where the body is likened to a house “built for us by a good sister soul.”¹⁸⁵ Indeed, Plotinus found the Gnostic notion an evil cosmic demiurge who fabricated this world morally repugnant.¹⁸⁶ For the soul to be a caretaker of the body is not considered a burdensome task. Excessive concern about one’s body however—whether it occurs in treating an illness, in a harsh ascetic regime, or concern over aging—pulls the soul away from its most proper activity, contemplation of Intellect.

There is a clear tension between competing duties of the soul: on the one hand the soul is the rightful caretaker of the body (and not necessarily its taskmaster), while on the other hand the soul is also to strive toward Intellect, a striving which is hindered somewhat by giving inordinate attention to the body. Thus, when the soul “looks to what comes before [Intellect] it exercise its intelligence, when it looks to itself it sets in order what comes after it [the body] and directs and rules it.”¹⁸⁷ This tension is maintained, if not strengthened, by Plotinus’ assertion that “man, and especially the good man, is not the composite of soul and body; separation from the body and despising of its so-called goods makes this plain.”¹⁸⁸ While Plotinus and Athanasius assert that the soul is benefited in contemplative efforts by first quieting the body through various disciplines, Plotinus, unlike Athanasius, allows no room for the soul to be changed by the body, much less an interest in the body as the means by which one might refine one’s soul. The body and soul are better off if they ‘go their separate ways.’ The good man will “gradually extinguish his bodily advantages by

¹⁸⁵ *Ennead* II.9.18.1-2, 15-16, in *Plotinus: Ennead II*, 297. Based on Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus*, James Robinson asserts that Plotinus was likely familiar with the Gnostic works *Zostrianos*, *Allogenes*, *The Three Tales of Seth*, and the *Trimorphic Protennoia*. See Robinson, ed., *Nag Hammadi Library*, 8.

¹⁸⁶ *Ennead* II.9.4; 9.5. Plotinus affirms some Gnostic teachings—the immortality of the soul, the intelligible universe, the necessity of the soul to ‘shun fellowship’ with the body and the soul’s separation from the body, escaping from becoming to being—but largely because these are found in Plato, *Ennead* II.9.6.38-43.

¹⁸⁷ *Ennead* IV.8.3.26-29, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 407.

¹⁸⁸ *Ennead* I.4.14.1-4, in *Plotinus: Porphyry on Plotinus, Ennead I*, 205, emphasis mine. Elsewhere he says “we ourselves are not it [body], nor are we clear of it, but it depends upon and is attached to us,” *Ennead* IV.4.18.114-15, in *Plotinus: Ennead IV*, 183.

neglect,” and at the same time, “take care of his bodily health,” not wishing altogether to be deprived of illness or pain.¹⁸⁹ As long as the body and soul are together however, there will be the tendency “to swing up and down” between excessive concern for the body and a longing for communion with Intellect.¹⁹⁰ This somewhat ambiguous relationship between the soul and the body has been appropriately described as a “Platonic insouciance.”¹⁹¹

Thus, Athanasius’ account of prelapsarian man in *Against the Heathen* does share a certain affinity with Neo-Platonic thought, particularly in his description of man’s ‘fall’ from the contemplation of things divine by lending inordinate attention to the lure of the body.¹⁹² Such statements appear in line with Socrates’ admonitions in *Phaedo* which suggests that the purification of the soul involves distancing it from the influences and distractions of the visible, corruptible body, distractions which constantly pull one away from the contemplation of things divine.¹⁹³ Yet, it is clear that Athanasius believed that the body itself could be refined, and marked the entry point for the refinement of the soul. Thus, while the fall may have been occasioned by inordinate attention to things material, the way back to paradise begins by attending to the body. While both Plato and Athanasius recognized that a healthy body is not an end in itself, Plato appeared uneasy in giving too much attention to the body, giving precedence to the soul over the body, even though the latter is also a good creation of the gods (*Timaeus*).

Despite these similarities however, Athanasius’ assertion that the soul is God’s good creation *ex nihilo* ensures a clear ontological distinction between Creator and the created, a distinction considerably blurred by Plato and denied altogether by Plotinus, as all bodies derive from Soul as an emanation of the One through Intellect. Alvyn

¹⁸⁹ *Ennead* I.4.14.21-24, in *Plotinus: Ennead I*, 205. Porphyry notes that Plotinus refused to take an enema for his diseased bowels, feeling it improper for a man of age. He also refused certain medicines containing the flesh of wild animals, *Life of Plotinus* 2.

¹⁹⁰ *Ennead* IV.4.18.35-36

¹⁹¹ Miles, *Plotinus on Body and Beauty*, 69.

¹⁹² Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 2-8, 5-8. See Plato, *Phaedrus* 246c-247c; A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 77.

¹⁹³ *Phaedo* 64c-67e; *Theatetus* 176a-b.

Pettersen is correct in asserting that while Athanasius speaks of the soul becoming divine in *Against the Heathen*, there is no connaturality between God and humankind.¹⁹⁴ Athanasius is comfortable in speaking of man as a composite of body and soul, the very assertion that Plotinus finds untenable. Even when Athanasius speaks of the soul as something ‘other’ than the creaturely body, Pettersen observes that Athanasius is making a functional, rather than a substantial, distinction.¹⁹⁵ Thus,

Pure human life for Athanasius lies not in the separation from sensible things, but in detachment from a wrong relationship of soul and body. The soul was created unadulterated by, but not separated from, its body. The one good God is the Creator and Sustainer of both, and the created body is then not to be fled. The human soul is not to be careless of its body: it is to recognize its God-given relationship to it.¹⁹⁶

Antony too, while adapting a different anthropological emphasis than Athanasius, follows something similar to the Platonic doctrine of the tripartite soul of which the mind (**nouʿ**) is the highest part. Rubenson aptly describes Antony’s anthropology as incorporating a pseudo-Platonic dualism with the tripartite division of man as mind, soul, and body as embraced by Origen.¹⁹⁷ Clearly, Antony’s description of the mind’s critical role of discerning the body from the soul shares similarities with Plato’s metaphor of a charioteer (**nouʿ**) driving a pair of winged horses (**tolqumikon** and **tolepikumhtikon**) where the charioteer represents that highest part of the soul struggling to control those two lower parts of the soul.¹⁹⁸ Similarly for Antony, “the passions originate in a soul no longer guided by reason, and affect man by being mingled with the members of the body, or the will.”¹⁹⁹ Athanasius too adduces this metaphor in *Against the Heathen*, where he likens the soul that forgets God and drives the members of one’s body beyond what is proper to a charioteer who pays no

¹⁹⁴ Pettersen, *Athanasius* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 42-44; *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 19.

¹⁹⁵ Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 43.

¹⁹⁶ Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 43.

¹⁹⁷ Rubenson, *Letters*, 68.

¹⁹⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus* 245c-256b; *Timaeus* 69c-e. Rubenson also identifies the influence of Origen and Clement of Alexandria. See *On Spiritual Perfection (Stromateis, III)* 36-40, in *Alexandrian Christianity: Select Translations of Clement and Origen*, ed. Henry Chadwick, trans. John E. L. Oulton (London: SCM Press, 1954), 115-118; Brown, *Body and Society*, 127-130.

¹⁹⁹ Rubenson, *Letters*, 70.

attention to the goal, driving the chariot at will.²⁰⁰ Clearly however, the goal of this exercise was for the sanctification of *both* body and soul. While Athanasius and Antony appear to have been influenced by Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy, they nevertheless affirm the goodness of the body and the crucial role it plays in the refinement of the soul, even as the language employed in describing ascetic regimes at times shares an affinity with Gnostic and Manichaean teachings.

Given that the theological underpinnings of Athanasius' and Antony's asceticism differ from those of Plato and Plotinus, the question remains whether Athanasius' promulgation of asceticism reflects a suspicion of the human body, given his exhortatory stance towards Antony's harsh ascetic regime in his *Life of Antony*, a regime put forward as a model for all Christians to follow.²⁰¹ If the body was capable of hindering the soul's proper activity, should one therefore simply disregard the body, or even treat it harshly? Pettersen readily points out that the cultural and intellectual context of Athanasius' theology required a substantially nuanced understanding of embodiment as the intellectual climate of Alexandria certainly allowed for varying stances toward the body.

Certainly, any calls for harsh treatment of the body should justifiably arouse suspicions of an underlying alliance with philosophical traditions which deny the inherent goodness of the human body as created by God. Yet, several Desert Fathers called for harsh treatment of the body. A well-known quote from Dorotheus on bodily mortification confirms popular notions of asceticism as a repressive, imprisoning regime aimed at utterly subduing the fallen body: "It kills me, I kill it."²⁰² In some cases disdain for the body led to the desecration of the very food used

²⁰⁰ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen* 5, 6.

²⁰¹ Athanasius also repeatedly exhorts those in his episcopate to engage in fasting in his *Festal Letters*. Pettersen notes that "Athanasius still holds a very high view of asceticism," *Athanasius*, 99.

²⁰² *The Lausaic History* 2.17, quoted in Kallistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?" in *Asceticism*, 9. Bushell has conducted a contemporary study of Ethiopian ascetics, and found similar statements. His spiritual father (*manafasawi abbat*) said of Jesus, "he was patient . . . like a lamb, he received all his torture to teach us that we have to receive all torture and to torture ourselves." See "Psychophysiological and Cross-cultural Dimensions of Ascetico-meditational Practices: Special Reference to the Christian Hermits of Ethiopia and Application to Theory in Anthropology and Religious Studies," Ph.D. diss. (Columbia University, 1995), 281.

to nourish the body. Isaac of Cellia emptied the post eucharistic ashes from the censor over his food while Joseph of Panepho tainted his fresh river water with sea water.²⁰³ Contemporary Ethiopian ascetics whose lineage can be traced back to the Desert Fathers engage in self-flagellation with whips and sticks, including the insertion of sharp objects into the flesh, the donning of painful leather belts and the wearing of chains.²⁰⁴ Pettersen himself admits that the Desert Fathers' "withdrawal from society and in their harsh disciplining of their bodies, seemed to be suggesting that matter was a hindrance to those seeking to be true soldiers of Christ."²⁰⁵

There is no doubt that ascetic practices, like all practices, are open to abuse and misuse. Similarly, Antony's asceticism cannot be so easily vindicated by simply condemning Dorotheus' stance toward the body as a step 'beyond' that of Antony's. Rather, such misgivings concerning the goodness of embodiment appear substantiated by a terse statement made by Antony himself in *Apophthegmata Patrum*, where he suggests that the body is indeed something to be disparaged and escaped:

Hate all peace that comes from the flesh. Renounce this life, so that you may be alive to God. . . . Suffer hunger, thirst, nakedness, be watchful and sorrowful; weep, and groan in your hearts; test yourselves, to see if you are worthy of God; despise the flesh, so that you may preserve your souls.²⁰⁶

Moreover, in his letters Antony appears to echo Plato on corporeality when he refers to man's body as 'heavy.'²⁰⁷ However, as already discussed, while Athanasius and Antony do share some surface affinities with their Neo-Platonic counterparts, it could hardly be said that their ascetic regime stemmed from the fact that the human body was 'more worthless than dirt.'

²⁰³ Ware, "Way of the Ascetics?," 10; Herbert Musurillo, "The Problem of Ascetical Fasting in the Greek Patristic Writers," *Traditio* 12 (1956), 25 n. 7.

²⁰⁴ Bushell, "Psychophysiological and Cross-cultural Dimensions," 105.

²⁰⁵ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 1.

²⁰⁶ *AP* Antony 33, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 8.

²⁰⁷ Antony, Letter VI: 42, 219, "And he [God] visits us by resolving us from the heaviness of this body, that we may leave it," Letter VI: 61, 220, "But there are also those who have opposed them in this heavy body in which we dwell . . ."

Though Athanasius and Antony clearly held a high view of asceticism, it did not stem from a despoliation of the body, much less from the body's secondary status to the rational soul. Antony labeled those who treated their bodies harshly as foolish.

"Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God."²⁰⁸ Antony himself says the Spirit who guides one in sanctification assigns a rule of "moderation after the power of the body."²⁰⁹ Though undoubtedly influenced by Neo-Platonic thought, Rubenson notes that for Antony, "matter is at one and the same time the source of 'the power of the devil,' and the precondition for progress in virtue."²¹⁰ Indeed, Antony's first letter spells out in some detail how the various members of the body can be purified, enabling one to move towards the fully-transformed body at the resurrection. The fact then that the body might be transformed presupposes, to some extent, its inherent goodness.

Rubenson summarizes Antony's view of asceticism:

It is clear that he did not share the contempt for the body manifest both in Plotinus and in Gnosticism. The body is to him not an irrelevant piece of matter, nor a prison of the soul, but a home to be cleansed, a sacrifice to be purified. . . . The body is to Antony not evil *per se*, nor is it responsible for its misuse; it is created for a good purpose, and only needs to be brought back to its original nature. The body is not simply to be discarded; it can be transformed.²¹¹

Asceticism was supported and sustained by the belief that the body, created by God, could be transformed through various practices. Though Antony and Athanasius employed Platonic images in their anthropological distinctions, they did not share the philosophy behind such images. Rather, for Athanasius, the body as God's good creation served as a protective against deprecation of the body.

²⁰⁸ *AP* Antony 8, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 3. Rubenson, *Letters*, notes the parallel with Letter VI: 106, 224. "Truly, my children, I also want you to know that there are many who have endured great struggle in this way of life, but have been killed by lack of discernment."

²⁰⁹ Antony, Letter I: 63, 201.

²¹⁰ Rubenson, *Letters*, 67.

²¹¹ Rubenson, *Letters*, 71. Rubenson does concede that Antony believed that such a bodily transformation involves making the body less material and more spiritual, and is thus more closely aligned to Origen.

Indeed, Pettersen observes that it was Athanasius' striking doctrine of the body created *ex nihilo* which created and preserved a clear distinction between the Creator and the created, providing the basis for the goodness of the human body.

All that exists then, the body included, is on the one hand the direct result of the fashioning of a God who cannot create anything that is evil; on the other hand it is such as only exists in and through the sustaining will of God.²¹²

While the body was of value to the soul, notes Pettersen, its primary value came from God, the body's maker and sustainer. The goodness of the body is further emphasized by the incarnation. Though humankind was lead astray by the passions of the body, Christ's coming in the flesh demonstrated the goodness of embodiment. Athanasius himself puts this eloquently in *Against the Heathen*:

But the reason why the Word, the Word of God, has united Himself with created things is truly wonderful, and teaches us that the present order of things is none otherwise than is fitting.²¹³

Athanasius believed the body to be of such significance, "that it was not inappropriate for the divine Logos to become incarnate by taking a body."²¹⁴ That God took on flesh can be none other than creation affirming. The goodness of embodiment itself sets a limit to both the practice of and motivation for asceticism.

Insights from Kallistos Ware prove particularly helpful in discerning the motivations, and hence the moral standing of ascetic practices. In order to distinguish between proper and improper ascetic discipline, Ware borrows a distinction between 'natural asceticism' and 'unnatural asceticism.'²¹⁵ The former is creation affirming, while the latter is creation-denying. Generally, observes Ware, unnatural asceticism "evinces either explicitly or implicitly a distinct hatred for God's creation, and particularly the body."²¹⁶ Unnatural asceticism, for instance, seeks out special forms of mortification, inflicting gratuitous pain on the body by wearing spikes to pierce one's flesh, or by fastening oneself in chains or iron fetters. A contemporary example is found in

²¹² Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 5.

²¹³ *Against the Heathen* 41.2, 26

²¹⁴ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 7; *Against the Heathen* 41-42.

²¹⁵ Ware, "Way of the Ascetics?," 9. This distinction is attributed to Dom Cuthbert Butler.

²¹⁶ Ware, "Way of the Ascetics?," 10.

Tolstoy, where the hermit Sergius seizes an axe and lops off his left index finger in an effort to calm his lust.²¹⁷ But natural asceticism, says Ware, seeks neither to maim the body nor cause it unnecessary pain, but rather reduces physical needs to a minimum. Unnatural asceticism involves starving the body and weakening it to a point where one could no longer serve another, or by intentionally making food and drink repulsive, while natural asceticism may simply mean limiting one's diet to vegetables and water and avoiding such foods as wine or meat.²¹⁸

This general stance on asceticism, claims Ware, has been adopted as the official attitude of the church from the fourth century onwards. He notes that the early church recognized the legitimacy of voluntary asceticism, not as a denial of one's body, but as an affirmation of the goodness of both the body and of God's creation in general. Abstaining from the things of material creation out of a loathing of such materiality was considered heretical, as pointed out in the *Apostolic Canons* (Syria, c. 400 CE):

If any bishop, presbyter or deacon, or any other member of the clergy, abstains from marriage, or from meat and wine, not by way of asceticism (*askēsis*) but out of abhorrence for these things, forgetting that God made "all things altogether good and beautiful" (Gen. 1:31), and that "he created humankind male and female" (Gen. 1:27), and so blaspheming the work of creation, let him be corrected, or else be deposed and cast out of the Church. The same applies also to a lay person.²¹⁹

Consistent with what has been observed in the early Egyptian eremitic context thus far, fasting is the means by which one learns to control his or her body. Moreover, in such a communal context, ascetic practices are not without social implications as well, a point which will be more fully explored in the final chapter. Ware concludes,

We fast, not out of hatred for God's creation, but so as to control the body; also fasting enables us to help the poor, for the food that we ourselves refrain from eating can be given to others who are in need. Natural asceticism, it can be argued, is warfare not against the body but for the body.²²⁰

²¹⁷ Leo Tolstoy, *Father Sergius*, in *Tolstoy: Master and Man and Other Stories*, trans. Paul Foote (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1977), 33-42.

²¹⁸ Ware, "Way of the Ascetics?," 9.

²¹⁹ Ware, "Way of the Ascetics?," 10, paraphrasing *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church: Their Canons and Dogmatic Decrees*, trans. Henry R. Percival, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 14, 597.

²²⁰ Ware, "Way of the Ascetics?," 10.

Interestingly, he traces the early church's stance towards asceticism back to Antony and Athanasius, asserting that "the earliest and most influential of all Greek monastic texts, the *Life of Antony*, adopts a markedly positive attitude towards the body."²²¹ This positive attitude calls for moderation with one's body, even as it may be transformed by such practices.

Though the body is good in itself as created by God, it is nevertheless also recognized as the source of passions that must be held in check.²²² Yet, as is clear from the opening chapters of *Against the Pagans* and *On the Incarnation*, embodiment for Athanasius represents the *possibility* of a fall if Adam does not keep appropriate control of his bodily desires. Pettersen observes, "whereas Platonists regarded human materiality as the mark of the Fall, Athanasius saw such as granting its possibility."²²³ From the very beginning of existence, Athanasius presents Adam as one who is already an ascetic of sorts, keeping his soul firmly in control of his bodily passions. Sin was born when Adam was turned away in his contemplative efforts towards his bodily passions. However, this original misuse of Adam's free will whereby he turned his attention away from God towards his body and bodily sensations does not signal that the body is in some way inferior to the soul. Rather, asserts Pettersen, the problem lay in Adam's assessment of the value of the body as independent from God.²²⁴ "Athanasius may *associate* sin and the body; but he never transmutes this into an equation. The body is the victim and not the origin of sin."²²⁵ In light of Christ's incarnation however, there comes a way to transform one's body, thereby undoing to some extent bodily corruption and decay. This transformation however, was unattainable without an ascetic regime by which the passions of the body might be brought under control. Even though it has been established that Antony's ascetic regime as portrayed by Athanasius did not stem from a

²²¹ Ware, "Way of the Ascetics?," 11.

²²² See *Against the Heathen* 2-3 and *On the Incarnation* 1-3. Both Pettersen and David Brakke observe that this move is motivated in part by Athanasius' desire to safeguard Christ's divinity in his dispute with the Arians, who asserted that Christ was a created being, though the highest being of God's creation. Thus, the passions stem from the body which Jesus took on, and not from Jesus' soul.

²²³ Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 86.

²²⁴ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 98, see *Against the Heathen* 3.

²²⁵ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 101.

disparagement of the body endemic to other philosophical systems at that time, the extreme images reflected in Antony's discipline still suggest the idea of a bodily mortification that implicitly denies the goodness of the human body. If therefore, ascetic discipline is to be posited as an alternative to prolongevity via genetic engineering, the idea of mortification must be addressed.

On Bodily Mortification

Both Antony and Athanasius allude to mortification in their writings, citing the apostle Paul in support of such notions. Pettersen too acknowledges that there are references to bodily mortification in the *Life of Antony*, yet maintains that these references “do not however countermand the positive attitude to the body.”²²⁶ The clearest reference to mortification occurs in *Life of Antony* 7, where Athanasius claims that Antony “more and more . . . mortified the body and kept it under subjection, so that he would not, after conquering some challenges, trip up in others.”²²⁷ Athanasius alludes to 1 Corinthians 9:27 where Paul ‘pommels’ (**upwpiazw**) his body and keeps it in subjection (**doul agwgew**). But Pettersen notes that the context of this statement follows Antony's victory over the spirit of fornication. Thus, Antony here is speaking of a withdrawal from the Tempter, and not a withdrawal from the body. Moreover, Pettersen astutely notes that just two chapters prior Athanasius records how the Lord helped Antony resist the temptations of the devil, asserting that it is the Lord “who for our sake took flesh and gave *the body* victory over the devil.”²²⁸ Antony also draws upon the mortification theme in his letters. His exhortation to subdue the body comes in the context of restricting the bodily movements—especially the desires stirred up by gluttony—so that one's bodily members might be purified. Like Athanasius, Antony quotes Paul: “*I castigate my body and bring it into subjection.*”²²⁹ The second and more explicit reference to mortification occurs after his description of purification for one's bodily members,

²²⁶ Pettersen, “Athanasius' Presentation of Antony of the Desert's Admiration for his Body,” *Studia Patristica* 21 (1987): 441. Tim Vivian also sees allusions to 1 Corinthians 9:27 in *Life of Antony* 45 and 55. See Vivian, *Life of Antony*, 155 and 178 respectively.

²²⁷ Pettersen, “Athanasius' Presentation,” 441.

²²⁸ Athanasius, *Life* 5, 197, emphasis mine.

²²⁹ Antony, Letter 1: 40, 199.

where he cites Colossians 3:5, “*Mortify your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, and evil desires, and so forth.*”²³⁰ Yet, Antony here is speaking particularly of the bodily movements, and not the body itself. It must be remembered that the purpose of these mortifications was “so that the whole body may be changed and placed under the authority of the Spirit.”²³¹

Another allusion to mortification is found in *Life of Antony* 46, where Antony is disappointed at not being numbered among the martyred in Alexandria. Antony had made the trip to Alexandria to comfort the Christians condemned to death, contending with them and if possible sharing in their fate. While Pettersen admits that Antony’s disappointment might imply anti-materialism, he suggests that it more likely reflects a desire to share in Christ’s passion. Another point which might have bolstered Pettersen’s claim is the fact that though Antony longed for martyrdom, he was “not willing to give himself up.”²³² Here Pettersen detects a reference to Paul in his letter to the Philippians 1:20-24 where he wrestles with the tension between departure and presence with the Lord and remaining in his body, though his ultimate concern was that Christ be exalted in his body—whether by life or death. Even Antony’s apparent delight in his approaching death (*Life of Antony* 46, 89) should not be interpreted as a liberation from the body, notes Pettersen, given especially Antony’s hope for a resurrection body (*Life of Antony* 91). “The delight in the approaching death is rather that of joy in approaching a life lived in an incorruptible body, in the presence of God.”²³³ Thus, while there are reflections in the writings of both Athanasius and Antony which draw upon the idea of mortification, these extreme measures of reigning in the passions of the body were not pursued because the body was considered evil, or of secondary status to the soul. In fact, Pettersen suggests that an alternative interpretation of mortification might involve putting bodily abuse *itself* to death.²³⁴ Though the idea of mortification is present in both Athanasius’ and Antony’s works, such mortification is not the mortification of the

²³⁰ Antony, Letter 1: 68, 201. From the Greek νεκρώω.

²³¹ Antony, Letter 1: 70, 201.

²³² Athanasius, *Life* 46, 208. Athanasius suggests that Antony was spared by God’s providence so that he might become a teacher to many.

²³³ Pettersen, “Athanasius’ Presentation,” 443.

²³⁴ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 101.

body itself. Pettersen here has realized a crucial and necessary distinction: while the body is indeed mortal, and while one is to put to death the sinful deeds of the body by acts of mortification, the body *itself* is not to be mortified.²³⁵ Though the body has suffered the consequences of sin, it is to be controlled and not annihilated.”²³⁶

For Athanasius, mortification through an ascetic regime stems from the desire to conform oneself to Christ, the Logos, enabling the body to become a “media of incarnate expression”²³⁷ to a hurting world. Asceticism was not a simple denial of the body, “but of relating it to the lordly and enlivening Logos, (therein finding its truly creaturely status and role).”²³⁸ Thus, Pettersen claims that for Athanasius the body has a *symbolic* function of expressing the divine mind, and at the same time an *instrumental* function in effecting the purposes of God.²³⁹ “A person, as it were, brings God to mankind by interpreting God ‘incarnate’ in his or her own body, and the same person directs and offers that body to God.”²⁴⁰ As will be evident shortly, both are visible in Antony, who repeatedly exhorts his followers to offer their bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord.²⁴¹ Pettersen refers to the body in this sense as a ‘sacramental body,’ where the body itself is revered and recognized as the locus of God’s activity in the world, while at the same time directing such actions to God. Thus, on the one hand, “a person is to play a priestly role towards himself or herself as a body,”²⁴² while on the other, “each [person] is to contemplate God’s purposes and intentions, and, in the light of such reflection, to be active through his or her body towards the created world.”²⁴³ In this way then, “a person’s body is created and

²³⁵ Pettersen, “Athanasius’ Presentation,” 442.

²³⁶ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 99.

²³⁷ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 99.

²³⁸ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 3.

²³⁹ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 3.

²⁴⁰ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 84.

²⁴¹ Letter III: 38, 208; Letter V: 7, 212; Letter VI: 83, 222, VI: 93, 223; Letter VII: 52, 228, VII: 58n, 230.

²⁴² Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 84.

²⁴³ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 99.

sustained to be one of God's media of incarnate expression."²⁴⁴ Thus, the idea of mortification is limited and reinterpreted by the inherent goodness of the material body as created by God, and as further confirmed by Christ's incarnation, where Christ offered himself as the sacrifice for the sins of all. While the body certainly requires discipline, it is ultimately to accomplish God's purposes in his world.

If the idea of bodily mortification has been reinterpreted, so too must the idea that a return of the soul to its 'natural state' is a subtle form of Stoic thought. Athanasius' asceticism is not a flight from the transient nature of the flesh and its turpitudes, an **ἀπαρῆια** that seeks to rise above the distractions of the body, for Athanasius' theological anthropology inherently denies the common philosophical association of evil with mutability and good with the unchanging.²⁴⁵ Indeed, Pettersen notes that

the ideal towards which Athanasius strove was not so much the *rising above* the suffering and sin of the flesh, as the *transforming*, through God's grace, of the world and the flesh."²⁴⁶

There is no denying however, that Athanasius employs Stoic imagery in his depiction of Antony as he progresses in the ways of asceticism, noting that he was 'calm in appearance' possessing a marked 'serenity of manner,' neither inappropriately overjoyed nor depressed.²⁴⁷ This would not be unusual, as elements of Stoicism are visible in several of the Greek fathers, including Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Climacus.²⁴⁸ While the exhortation to 'kill the passions' was not an uncommon theme among the Desert Fathers,²⁴⁹ Ware responds, "cannot even the passions be redirected and used in God's service?"²⁵⁰ While acknowledging that asceticism has often been negatively construed as a subduing the passions stemming

²⁴⁴ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 99. "The body *is* rather than *has* a material means of expression. It is the vehicle or instrument through which the soul relates to the world and the world to the soul," 112.

²⁴⁵ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 100.

²⁴⁶ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 100.

²⁴⁷ See Athanasius, *Life* 14, 67, 200, 214 respectively.

²⁴⁸ Ware, "Way of the Ascetics?," 11-12.

²⁴⁹ AP Poemen 184, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 193.

²⁵⁰ Ware, "Way of the Ascetics?," 11. Ware notes that John Cassian adapted the tradition of *apatheia* to a Western audience, defining it as 'purity of heart' (*puritas cordis*). He also cites the somewhat paradoxical phrase of Diadochus, "the fire of *apatheia*," whereby the soul exists in a burning love for God and fellow humans.

from a hatred of the body, Ware avers that asceticism “can also be interpreted in more affirmative terms, as the reintegration of the body and the *transformation* of the passions into their true and natural condition.”²⁵¹

Thus, asceticism as practiced and taught by Athanasius and Antony represents one possible means by which humans are able to put on the bodily incorruptibility made possible by the bodily resurrection of Christ. The impulses of the body were not simply to be subdued so that the soul might focus on its own contemplative activity, but so that the body itself might be transformed. As will become evident shortly, ascetic practices—fasting in particular—was thought to effectively slow down the body in the hopes that *the body might be remade*.

On Fasting and Remaking the Body

That the body was somewhat malleable was a common viewpoint among the early Christians from at least the third century onwards. Peter R. L. Brown has carried out an extensive study on embodiment as interpreted by early Christianity, offering key insights to the perception of bodily functioning. That the body might be *remade* was wholly consistent with theories of bodily functioning and operation at this time, observes Brown, who describes the body’s operations as a closed or ‘autarkic’ system capable of conserving its own energy, a system most fully realized and identified with prelapsarian man and woman.

The ascetics of late antiquity tended to view the human body as an “autarkic” system. In ideal conditions it was thought capable of running on its own “heat”; it would need only enough nourishment to keep that heat alive. In its “natural” state—a state with which the ascetics tended to identify the bodies of Adam and Eve—the body had acted like a finely tuned engine, capable of “idling” indefinitely.²⁵²

I have already demonstrated that Athanasius and Antony shared the belief that asceticism allowed one to remake the body, returning it to the ‘natural’ (**fusi**) state of Adam and Eve before the fall. According to Derwas J. Chitty, this theme was

²⁵¹ Ware, “Way of the Ascetics?,” 12, emphasis mine.

²⁵² *Body and Society*, 223. He observes that this view of the body is espoused by Gregory of Nyssa, in *On the Making of Man*, 30. See also Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 241.

constantly taught by the East Christian ascetics.²⁵³ “Their aim is the recovery of Adam’s condition before the Fall . . . man’s fallen condition being **paral/fusin**—‘unnatural.’”²⁵⁴ Thus, there is a widespread belief that ascetic practices were instrumental in the recovery of the Adamic state. Brown concludes that “the body-image which the ascetics brought with them into the desert gave considerable cognitive and emotional support to their hope for change through self-mortification.”²⁵⁵ In particular, the discipline of fasting held the most promise in transforming one’s body into a ‘finely tuned engine.’

Fasting

Critical to the recovery of the Adamic state was the ascetic discipline of fasting. When discussing the importance of the body in Patristic thought, Brown can scarcely underestimate the importance of fasting for the Church Fathers, particularly those ascetics who endured the impossibly inhumane conditions of the nearly uninhabitable desert.

Once they had faced out the terrible risks involved in remaining human in a nonhuman environment, the men of the desert were thought capable of recovering, in the hushed silence of that dead landscape, a touch of the unimaginable glory of Adam’s first state. Hence the importance of fasting in the world of the Desert Fathers.²⁵⁶

Here, Brown echoes the sentiments of both Athanasius and Antony; that fasting enabled one to return to the bodily state experienced by Adam in the garden, a bodily state often referred to as ‘natural.’ He notes that many believed that Adam’s sin was intimately and inextricably intertwined with his belly; hence, the denial of one’s stomach was on the pathway back to Eden. “To fast heroically, by living in the desert, the land without food, was to relive Adam’s first and most fatal temptation,

²⁵³ Chitty, *Desert A City*, 4.

²⁵⁴ Chitty, *Desert A City*, 4. See also Ware, “Way of the Ascetics?,” 3-15. Ware says, “asceticism has not subverted Antony’s physicality but restored it to its ‘natural state,’ that is to say, to its true and proper condition as intended by God. This natural state continues up to the end of Antony’s long life,” 11.

²⁵⁵ Brown, *Body and Society*, 223.

²⁵⁶ Brown, *Body and Society*, 220.

and to overcome it, as Adam had not done.”²⁵⁷ Even those who did not dwell in the desert were not exempt from periodic practices of fasting at different times throughout the year. “To fast for Lent,” for instance, “was to undo a little of the fateful sin of Adam.”²⁵⁸ But for those pursuing the life of asceticism were forced to endure what Brown calls the ‘Cold Turkey Treatment,’ where the ascetic drove excessive dependence on food and sex from the body.²⁵⁹ Indeed, such times of fasting proved beneficial for the body, giving it a rest from the work of digesting food, refining one’s soul and possibly aiding in recovering a measure of the bodily incorruption.

Brown notes that through a drastic reduction in food intake, the ascetic could essentially ‘retune’ or remake the body, transforming the body into that finely tuned engine of which he spoke earlier. Through the discipline of fasting, the ascetic

. . . slowly remade his body. He turned it into an exactly calibrated instrument. Its drastic physical changes, after years of ascetic discipline, registered with satisfying precision the essential, preliminary stages of the long return of the human person, body and soul together, to an original, natural and uncorrupted state.²⁶⁰

Particularly interesting is the belief that fasting somehow retards the body’s decay, enabling the ascetic to ‘put on’ a little of that bodily incorruption initiated by Christ’s incarnation. Brown notes that the ascetic’s body “was slowed down by the long fasts and sleepless nights of the desert.”²⁶¹ I have demonstrated how Athanasius believed that Christ’s incarnation has opened up the way for us to return to Eden. Brown observes that for the desert father “the myth of Paradise regained” was a “huge weight . . . placed on the frail bodies of the ascetics.”²⁶² Athanasius’ belief that the

²⁵⁷ Brown, *Body and Society*, 221. Indeed, Brown observes that it was widely believed in Egypt that the first sin of Adam and Eve was not sexual in nature, but was the sin of ‘ravenous greed,’ *Body and Society*, 220.

²⁵⁸ Brown, *Body and Society*, 220.

²⁵⁹ Brown observes that Clement of Alexandria approvingly quotes Valentinus who believed that Jesus himself exercises such bodily self-control that he was able to eat and drink in such a way that he had no need to defecate. See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* Bk. 3, Ch. 7, 59, in *FC*, ed. Thomas P. Halton, vol. 85, *Clement of Alexandria: Stromateis Books One to Three*, trans. John Ferguson, 292-293.

²⁶⁰ Brown, *Body and Society*, 223.

²⁶¹ Brown, *Body and Society*, 224.

²⁶² Brown, *Body and Society*, 222.

ascetic might actually remake his body through discipline represents “the myth of Paradise regained,” a remaking that enabled a prolonged life which may have involved slowing down the body’s very aging process.

Indeed, as was shown earlier in the *Life of Antony* 14, the twenty years of solitude and fasting in the harsh desert left Antony’s body lean and unchanged. Athanasius records that Antony “had the same habit of body as before, and was neither fat . . . nor lean from fasting . . . but was just the same as they had known him before his retirement.”²⁶³ It has been well-noted that Athanasius’ language here is considerably conspicuous with Porphyry’s *Life of Pythagoras*, suggesting that he borrowed from this work.²⁶⁴ Just as Athanasius encouraged those believers seeking an advanced life of virtue to replace meat with vegetables, wine with water, and an abundance of food with sparse meals,²⁶⁵ Pythagoras too advocated the avoidance of wine and meat as part of the occult diet of Hercules. Athanasius could scarcely bring himself to mention Antony and ‘luxurious’ food in the same sentence. He quips that “of flesh and wine it is superfluous even to speak, since no such thing was found with the other earnest men.”²⁶⁶ Indeed, while Porphyry and Antony may have shared common ascetic practices and a recognition that a particular diet was beneficial to the body, their philosophical commitments were quite different.²⁶⁷ While Pythagoras’ diet predates Antony’s, this idea of a limited diet was not foreign to the Israelites. It is worth mentioning those four young deportees from Judah under Nebuchadnezzar’s reign who were allowed only vegetables and water that they might not defile themselves with royal food, whose healthy appearance outshone those who had feasted on the King’s choice food and wine (Daniel 1:6-15). While the text informs

²⁶³ Athanasius, *Life* 14, 200.

²⁶⁴ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 71. See Porphyry, *Vita Pythagorae* 35, in *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1991), 130. Other similar texts in Greek asceticism include Porphyry’s *De Abstinencia*, Iamblichus’ *De Vita Pythagorica*, and Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius*. See Anthony Meredith, “Asceticism—Christian and Greek,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 27 (October 1976): 314.

²⁶⁵ Athanasius, *Fragments on the Moral Life* 2, trans. David Brakke, in *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 314.

²⁶⁶ *Life* 7, 198.

²⁶⁷ See Meredith, “Asceticism—Christian and Greek,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 27 (1976): 319-323. See also Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 71; Pettersen, “Athanasius’ Presentation,” 444; Rubenson, *Letters*, 132.

us that God specifically granted these young men favor in the eyes of the king's official (1:9), and that he greatly increased their knowledge and understanding (1:17), there is nothing to suggest that their enhanced physiological appearance was anything more than the outcome of a good diet.

If fasting is a means by which one slows the body down, so to speak, one must understand exactly what such fasting involved. While there is little specific indication of Antony's fasting regime in the *Life of Antony*, it is clear that his diet consisted of bread, salt, and water, and that he usually ate once daily, occasionally abstaining from food for up to several days at a time.²⁶⁸ Later on Antony planted corn and potted herbs, making his own bread, occasionally eating a frugal relish from palm trees.²⁶⁹ Thus, contrary to some modern notions of fasting, the practice did not involve starvation or even extended periods of complete abstinence from food. As was noted earlier, Antony's exhortation to moderation applies equally to the discipline of fasting. Moreover, it has been noted that in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* the Desert Fathers regularly discouraged prolonged periods of fasting, exhorting instead that a little food be taken each day.²⁷⁰ For example, Barsanuphius of Gaza described fasting as leaving the table with only a little less hunger and thirst than before one began so that fasting might not lead to a weakened body thereby hindering reflection, prayer, and self examination.²⁷¹ Thus, practices which might actually harm the body—fasting as starvation—were generally not found. Indeed, even Antony's most severe fasting involved eating once every four days.²⁷² Thus, in the tradition of the Desert Fathers in general, there is an emphasis on moderation in one's discipline.

²⁶⁸ Athanasius, *Life* 7-8, 197-198. It has been noted that the type of bread eaten by Antony would have contained many more nutrients than the typical bread of today.

²⁶⁹ Athanasius, *Life* 50, 209.

²⁷⁰ Ware, "Way of the Ascetics?," 9, referring to Ammonas 4 and Poemen 31, *AP*.

²⁷¹ St. Barsanuphius, "Letter 154," and "Letter 838," in *Letters from the Desert: Barsanuphius and John*, trans. John Chryssavgis (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 91, 198 respectively. John also said: "But give the body just a little less than it requires. For this is the way of the fathers [Desert Fathers]: neither to be wasteful nor to be crushed in one's discipline," "Letter 212," *Letters from the Desert*, 9.

²⁷² Athanasius, *Life* 7, 198.

In order to grasp a fuller account of the physiological benefits of fasting, it is also instructive to consider the implications of gluttony. If fasting was thought to be a means of putting on bodily incorruption in slowing the body down, engorging the body with food was thought to do the very opposite. While Athanasius believed that fasting could effectively slow the body down by slowing the corruption that comes through aging, putting on that incorruption made possible by Christ's incarnation, an equally common belief among the Church Fathers was that stuffing the body with food would actually *shorten* one's life. Plying the body with food was even thought to bring on premature aging.²⁷³

For gout soon fastens upon them, and untimely palsy, and premature old age, and headache, and flatulence, and feebleness of digestion, and loss of appetite, and they require constant attendance of physicians, and perpetual doseing, and daily care.²⁷⁴

Chrysostom spoke disparagingly of those who "distend their stomach[s], and blunt their senses, and sink the vessel by an overladen cargo of food . . . in some shipwreck of the body," asking rhetorically whether or not those who live moderately are more vigorous, "fulfilling their proper function with much ease."²⁷⁵ The man who lives in such a way, says Chrysostom, has been aptly described by Paul as "dead whilst he liveth."²⁷⁶

It is not only the body that suffers however, but one's soul as well. The gluttonous person cannot therefore be counted as living, though bodily alive, because the soul cannot go unaffected by luxury. "Who can describe the storm that comes of luxury, that assails his soul and his body?"²⁷⁷ Were we to actually see our soul in this condition, says Chrysostom, it would certainly appear 'wasted with leanness:'

If it were possible to bring the soul into view, and to behold it with our bodily eyes, that of the luxurious would seem depressed, mournful, miserable, and wasted with leanness; for the more the body grows

²⁷³ Excessive food intake was believed to cause numerous maladies. See Musurillo, "The Problem of Ascetical Fasting," 17-19.

²⁷⁴ Chrysostom *No One Can Harm Him Who Does Not Injure Himself* 8, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 9, 277.

²⁷⁵ *No One Can Harm Him*, 7-8, 276-277.

²⁷⁶ Chrysostom, *Homily XIII* in *Homilies on the First Epistle of Saint Paul to Timothy*, *NPNF* First Series, vol. 13, 451.

²⁷⁷ Chrysostom, *Homily XIII*, 451.

sleek and gross, the more lean and weakly is the soul; and the more one is pampered, the more is the other hampered.²⁷⁸

The Church Fathers recognized that such indulgence in luxury impaired one's soul and hence one's very understanding of Scripture. Gregory Nazianzen asserted that one cannot rightly understand Scripture apart from 'keeping under the body' by fasting, by submitting the dust (the body) to the spirit "as they would do who form a just judgment of our composite nature."²⁷⁹ Brown has observed that it was after the fall when the twisted will of humankind led to the condition where men crammed their bodies with food, generating a surplus of physical appetite, anger, and sexual urges.²⁸⁰ The life of the ascetic however, allowed no room for culinary luxuries. There was no need for the 'perpetual dosing' and 'constant attendance of physicians' in Antony's case, who experienced a long life by even modern standards. The life of the ascetic called for nothing less than a re-ordering of body and soul.

Re-ordering of Body and Soul

Having discussed the psychophysiological enhancements associated with the ascetic regime, and the possibility of a contemporary expression of asceticism as a means by which one might effectively slow the aging process, it is critical to give a more complete account of asceticism as put forth by Athanasius and Antony lest their ascetic regime become distorted. For to speak only of remaking or reforming the body by denying the body is to miss the larger goal of which such bodily reformation is a part, namely, the reformation of one's soul. For the desert ascetics, remaking the body by effectively slowing it down was subsumed under, yet integral to, the proper reordering of body and soul, where the soul, in submission to God, ruled the body. Both Athanasius and Antony espoused an ascetic regime whereby the body becomes the servant of the soul in a right relationship to God, even as the body begins to assume the state of Adam's body in paradise.

It has already been shown that Antony's ascetic regime involved remaking the body in the transformation of one's soul in order that both body and soul might again

²⁷⁸ Chrysostom, *Homily XIII*, 451.

²⁷⁹ Nazianzen, *The First Theological Oration 7*, *NPNF Second Series*, vol. 7, 287.

²⁸⁰ *Body and Society*, 223.

assume the ‘natural’ state where the soul rules over the body.²⁸¹ This theme accords Athanasius’ portrayal of Antony in the *Life of Antony*.²⁸² Again, this original state is marked by some measure of bodily incorruptibility, where the impulses of the body are under full control of the soul. Athanasius makes this explicitly clear in his description of Antony’s harsh treatment of his own body. Compelled by Jesus’ admonition in Matthew 6:31 that one should not worry about what one will eat, drink, or wear, Athanasius observes that Antony advocated giving ‘short space’ to the body in order that the body might become subject to the soul. Thus, Antony

used to say that it behoved a man to give all his time to his soul rather than his body, yet to grant a short space to the body through its necessities; but all the more earnestly to give up the whole remainder to the soul and seek its profit, that it might not be dragged down by the pleasures of the body, but, on the contrary, *the body might be in subjection to the soul*.²⁸³

It is also useful to remember that Antony advocated making an inventory of one’s thought life, so that one “may never think of what is unseemly.”²⁸⁴ But such exercises were not in exclusion to the body, but again so that the soul might maintain control over the body. For Antony concludes his instructions on creating a visible inventory of one’s thoughts by stating that such exercises enable one to make proper use of one’s body: “And if we conduct ourselves this way, we will have the power to make a servant of the body and please the Lord and trample on all of the deceptions of the Enemy.”²⁸⁵ Thus, both Athanasius and Antony understood that the purpose of asceticism was not simply to suppress bodily desires solely to remake the body, but to bring the body under control of the soul.

A reordering of the body-soul relationship involves the tension of restraining the impact of the bodily desires upon the soul so that the soul might be the rightful master over the body. As Brakke notes, “life in the desert revealed, if anything, the

²⁸¹ Antony, Letter I: 32.

²⁸² Rubenson similarly observes that “the emphasis in the letters on original creation as rational, and on the need to return to this original rational state, to the true nature of man, is also in accordance with central notions in the *Vita* [*Life of Antony*],” *Letters*, 134.

²⁸³ Athanasius, *Life* 45, 208, emphasis mine.

²⁸⁴ Athanasius, *Life* 55, 211.

²⁸⁵ Athanasius, *Life* 55, in *The Life of Antony*, trans. Tim Vivian from the Coptic, 178.

inextricable interdependence of body and soul.”²⁸⁶ But this relationship is more than mutual interdependence; the metaphor seized upon by Antony and others was enslavement, used by Paul in 1 Corinthians. Such enslavement involves a tension between togetherness and distance. This distance was also evident in Antony’s first letter, where he describes the mind, under the Spirit’s guidance, helps the ascetic discriminate between the body and the soul and learns how to purify them both through repentance.²⁸⁷ On the one hand, Brakke observes that for Athanasius the “ascetic behaviours knit the body and soul together in a relationship of enslavement.”²⁸⁸ At the same time, however, the ascetic regime ensures that the soul and the body ‘keep their distance.’ “The discipline of enslaving the body keeps it at a safe distance from the soul, protecting the soul from the dangerous movements and desires of the body.”²⁸⁹ The metaphor of death captures the idea of such a separation. As Athanasius understood natural death as a complete separation of the soul from the body, so he understood ‘ascetic’ death as the distancing of the soul from the body’s passions through renunciation.²⁹⁰ This distancing of the body’s passions from the soul enabled one to attend to the needs of one’s soul or will. Despite the notion of body-soul separation however, ascetic death should not be construed as a dualistic exercise. Athanasius urged those in his episcopate to fast in *both* body and soul, considering not only the food for the stomach, but also the virtues and vices that are food for the soul.

Behold, my brethren, how much a fast can do, and in what manner the law commands us to fast. It is required that not only with the body should we fast, but with the soul. . . . For virtues and vices are the food of the soul, and it can eat either of these two meats, and incline to either of the two, according to its own will.²⁹¹

²⁸⁶ Brown, *Body and Society*, 236.

²⁸⁷ Antony, Letter I: 27, 199.

²⁸⁸ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 241.

²⁸⁹ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 241.

²⁹⁰ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 241. Brakke also suggests that the metaphor of death “implied both the neutralization of the body’s passions and the abandonment or killing of one’s social self as defined by normal social and economic activities,” 159.

²⁹¹ Athanasius, *Festal Letter I.5*, *NPNF Second Series*, vol. 4, 508. The emphasis on the spiritual element in fasting is well-attested in the early church. See Musurillo, “The Problem of Ascetical Fasting,” 35-42; 50-54.

Brakke contends that for Athanasius there is no opposition or dichotomy between bodily fasting and the fasting of the soul. Rather, “fasting was designed to focus the soul on the divine nourishment of the virtues and the Word of God; it brought the body under the control of the soul’s will.”²⁹² Thus, the reordering of body and soul requires and even presupposes, that the heart or soul be appropriately directed toward God. The ‘natural’ state to which asceticism strives is not simply the soul in control of the body, but also the soul in communion with God as the rightful director of one’s body. Antony does not submit his body to his soul, but, in the words of Brakke, “subjects his body to his Word-guided soul . . .”²⁹³ In more contemporary terms, Dallas Willard has noted that fasting “reveals to us how much our peace depends upon the pleasures of eating. . . . to assuage the discomforts in our bodies by faithless and unwise living and attitudes.”²⁹⁴ Fasting “demonstrate(s) how powerful and clever our body is in getting its own way against our strongest resolves.”²⁹⁵ Willard echoes Athanasius’ instructions in his festal letters in observing that fasting is more than abstaining from food; fasting enables one to feast on God.

Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food. Through it, we learn by experience that God’s word to us is a life substance, that it is not food (“bread”) alone that gives life, but also the words that proceed from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). We learn that we too have meat to eat that the world does not know about (John 4:32, 34). Fasting unto our Lord is therefore feasting—feasting on him and on doing his will.²⁹⁶

Fasting involves abstaining from food so that the Christian might be equipped for God, increasingly enabled to do his will.

When speaking of reordering the body and soul, it is not inappropriate to speak again in terms of mortification as “the regaining of self-control, even the return of the

²⁹² Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 188.

²⁹³ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 244

²⁹⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988), 166.

²⁹⁵ Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 166.

²⁹⁶ Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 166. See also Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 195-200.

object self, the body, to a person's own rational control."²⁹⁷ Having already discussed the negative connotations associated with mortification of the body, Pettersen asserts that one can understand mortification—insofar as Athanasius' thinking was concerned—as involving the *whole* self offered to the Logos so that the Logos might take over the self.²⁹⁸ This is evident in the opening chapters of the *Life of Antony*, where Antony “endeavoured to make himself fit to appear before God, being pure in heart and ever ready to submit to His counsel, and to Him alone.”²⁹⁹ Such mortification involves a death to one's self:

Mortification here means a transformation of the will, a metamorphosis of one's whole attitude and a radical shifting of the very centre of the personality from the self to God. In this sense ‘death’ to selfishness is not too strong a description.³⁰⁰

This ideal of death to selfishness is also characterized as the right reordering of body and soul, as the “reasonable dominion of the body by the soul.”³⁰¹ According to Athanasius' understanding, says Pettersen, a disciplined body is no longer a hindrance to one's soul, and becomes employable to one's soul in one's service to God.

When the body is disciplined, its temptations cease to be temptations; its needs are met but not indulged; and its capacities are used in the service of God, through the guidance of the rational soul, and are not allowed to dictate and to rule the soul—which then irrationally connives with its body—to its own selfish ends.³⁰²

Pettersen stresses the unity of the body and soul—even as the soul leads the body—through ascetic practices, concluding that the ascetic engages in a process whereby gradually she becomes ‘fully herself.’ Thus,

Slowly but surely the rational soul is graciously allowed to play its proper role towards its own body, wherein a person becomes fully himself or herself in the unity of both the body and the soul, the body

²⁹⁷ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 102. Pettersen also construes mortification as putting to death our rebellious acts against God.

²⁹⁸ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 101.

²⁹⁹ Athanasius, *Life* 7, 198.

³⁰⁰ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 101.

³⁰¹ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 100.

³⁰² Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 99.

being animated and the soul expressing itself through its body in obedience to God.³⁰³

If asceticism has as its goal the reordering of both body and soul in the transformation of the whole person, it must also be asserted that there is a particular order which *begins with the body*.

Beginning with the Body

Among the Desert Fathers there was general agreement that the *first* step in bringing the body under control of the soul involved disciplining the body. In Antony's first letter he instructs his initiates to first begin with purifying the body *before* turning one's attention to the soul (and finally the mind).

First the body is purified by much fasting, by many vigils and prayers and by the service which makes a man to be straightened in body, cutting off from himself all the lusts of the flesh. . . . Then the Spirit that is his guide begins to open the eyes of his soul, to give to it also repentance, that it may be purified.³⁰⁴

Thus, for Antony, the purification of one's soul requires that one *first* discipline the body, quieting the bodily desires that wage war upon one's soul. Thus, "in the desert tradition, the body was allowed to become the discreet mentor of the proud soul."³⁰⁵

In his study of the significance of the body for the early church, Peter Brown has also observed that bodily self-mortification for the desert ascetics was only a *preliminary* step, where the conquering of hunger and sexual drives along with past habits allowed the ascetic to focus on his heart and his private will.³⁰⁶ Brown notes that

the ascetic had to learn, over the long years of life in the desert, to do nothing less than to untwist the very sinews of his private will. Fasting and heavy labor were important, in their own right, in the first years of

³⁰³ Pettersen, *Athanasius and the Human Body*, 104.

³⁰⁴ Chitty, *Letters of Antony*, 2. Rubenson's translation here is less clear: "First, the body through many fasts and vigils, through the exertion and the exercises of the body, cutting off [*sic*] all the fruits of the flesh," Letter I: 24, 198.

³⁰⁵ Brown, *Body and Society*, 237.

³⁰⁶ Brown, *Body and Society*, 225.

the ascetic life, and especially for young monks in their full physical vigor.³⁰⁷

Hence, the young Antony is ever increasing in his discipline of fasting and sexual abstinence, the same Antony who in his first letter encouraged his initiates to discipline and purify the body as an initial step in refining the soul. For when the bodily impulses are dealt with, says Brown, the labor of breaking up the hardened soil of one's heart could begin in the hopes of attaining that blessedness enjoyed by the prelapsarian Adam in paradise.

Once the florid symptoms of greed and sexual longing, associated with the ascetic's past habits, had subsided, he was brought face to face with the baffling closedness of his own heart. It was to the heart, and to the strange resilience of the private will, that the great tradition of spiritual guidance associated with the Desert Fathers directed its most searching attention. In Adam's first state, the "natural" desires of the heart had been directed toward God, with bounding love and open-hearted awe in the huge delight of Paradise. It was by reason of Adam's wilfulness that these desires had become twisted into a "counter-nature."³⁰⁸

Indeed, these themes have already been observed in Athanasius' and Antony's earlier writings. Thus, the initial steps in returning to the soul to its rightful place as leader of the body involved disciplining the body and quieting its effect on the soul, enabling the ascetic to 'untwist' the tangled mess of his private will as his attention was directed towards God. Without the former, the latter hardly seemed possible.

Thus, the importance of the body for refining the whole person can scarcely be underestimated. It has been shown that Antony recognized that the first step in re-ordering body and soul was careful attention to the body through fasting and vigils. There could be no purification of the soul without first giving attention to one's own body; there could be no purification of the soul without the purification of the body as well. Athanasius records that Antony's harsh treatment of his body enabled him not only to slow his body down, but also helped him conquer his soul and the demonic forces that sought to assail him. Brown's concluding assessment of the

³⁰⁷ Brown, *Body and Society*, 224. Bushell too acknowledges that this same principle holds among the Ethiopian monks and hermits today, whereby fasting helps bring the bodily desires under control so that the ascetic can continue on the work of plowing up one's soul or will. See "Psychophysiological and Comparative Analysis," 558.

³⁰⁸ Brown, *Body and Society*, 225.

importance of the body in the transformation of one's self is not overstated: "Seldom, in ancient thought, had the body been seen as more deeply implicated in the transformation of the soul; and never was it made to bear so heavy a burden."³⁰⁹ If indeed the body had never been so heavily implicated in the transformation of one's soul as Brown suggests, it has been shown that the body also reaped the benefits of having served in the soul's transformation via a reduced diet, effectively slowing it down and affording it a measure of immunity from corruption.

Over time however, the body reaped the benefits of a well-ordered soul. There are suggestions in the *Life of Antony* that the body is the direct beneficiary of a soul that is in tune with God and thus in control of the body. Athanasius observes that Antony's very bodily disposition and movements reflected the state of his soul, namely Antony's serene manner.

Yet neither in height nor in breadth was he conspicuous above others, but in the serenity of his manner and the purity of his soul. For as his soul was free from disturbances, his outward appearance was calm; so from the joy of his soul he possessed a cheerful countenance, and from his bodily movements could be perceived the condition of his soul.³¹⁰

Antony's outwardly visible serenity revealed the purity of his soul, attracting others to him. Other ascetics "ran to him as if dragged by his eyes,"³¹¹ though there was nothing particularly attractive about Antony's general physique. Athanasius concludes, "thus Antony was recognized, for he was never disturbed, for his soul was at peace; he was never downcast, for his mind was joyous."³¹² This visible serenity has been variously described as "the physical byproduct of a spiritual state,"³¹³ it was "human nature as it was made to be."³¹⁴

³⁰⁹ Brown, *Body and Society*, 235.

³¹⁰ Athanasius, *Life* 67, 214.

³¹¹ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 244, translating Athanasius, *Life* 67.

³¹² Athanasius, *Life* 67, 214.

³¹³ Brown, *Body and Society*, 224.

³¹⁴ Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 93.

Earlier in the *Life of Antony* there was evidence of this visible ‘stillness’ of Antony’s physical appearance when he appeared before several of his followers after twenty years of solitude. After observing that Antony was unchanged in body over this length of time, Athanasius infers the state of Antony’s soul from his attitude and general comportment as

neither contracted as by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor possessed by laughter or dejection, for he was not troubled when he beheld the crowd, nor overjoyed at being saluted by so many. But he was altogether even as a being guided by reason, and abiding in a natural state.³¹⁵

Here again are elements of Stoic thought in Athanasius’ description of Antony’s ‘natural’ state, though Antony is never described as attaining a state that could be described as passionless (**ἀπαθεια**).³¹⁶ This natural state as understood by Athanasius involved the soul in proper relation to God, rightly governing the body, enabling the body to put on that incorruption which will be fully realized in the eschaton. Oliver O’Donovan expresses what Athanasius and Antony found to be true, that “bodily life is not given us in order for it to collapse spectacularly under the weight of the spirit [or desires]; it is given to sustain spiritual life, and in turn to be renewed by it.”³¹⁷

It will be useful in summarizing what has been covered thus far, and to offer some preliminary reflections before considering some more extended reflections concerning fasting and the current attempts to retard aging via genetic engineering in the next chapter. In examining the practices of asceticism as portrayed by Anthony and Athanasius, it has been shown that such practices were viewed as the primary means by which the Christian might regain in some measure, what was lost by Adam’s sin, namely, a heightened degree of bodily incorruptibility allowing for the possibility of extended life spans. Evidence of a reduction in the aging rate has recently been observed among contemporary Ethiopian ascetics and hermits, whose

³¹⁵ Athanasius, *Life* 14, 200.

³¹⁶ Brakke observes that this term never appears in the *Life of Antony*, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 243.

³¹⁷ “Keeping Body and Soul Together,” in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, ed. Steven E. Lammers and Allen Verhey, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 232.

prolongevity effects mimic those of caloric restriction among laboratory animals. Moreover, asceticism as espoused by Athanasius and Antony was distanced from other forms of asceticism motivated by and aligned with Platonic, Neo-Platonic, Stoic and gnostic understandings of embodiment in affirming the inherent goodness of the body, refusing even the idea that the body is good only as a vehicle for the reformation of one's soul. While Antony and Athanasius utilized the language and images utilized by Greek philosophy, it was shown that a Christian understanding of asceticism, while certainly susceptible to abuse, affirms the inherent goodness of both the body and the soul as God's good creation *ex nihilo*. Such an asceticism is not aimed at eliminating desires, but redirecting one's desires under control of the Spirit, thereby restoring the soul as the rightful ruler of the body and the body's impulses. Among the Desert Fathers, fasting was recognized as a crucial first step in the re-ordering of one's body and soul. Only after one had effectively 'quieted' the impulses of one's body could one most effectively deal with the more reticent desires of one's heart and will. One's body would thereby reap the benefits not only through caloric restriction, but as the visible expression of a well-ordered soul. In light of these findings, several preliminary reflections are offered with respect to asceticism and the retardation of the human aging process.

First, there was certainly an awareness that fasting enabled the ascetic to remake his body, effectively slowing it down. Athanasius believed that an ascetic regime enabled one to put on a heightened degree of bodily incorruptibility. This fact is borne out in Antony's extremely long life. While it is open to question whether Antony actually reached the age of one hundred and five, it is not unreasonable to conclude that he did actually live a very long life. As Bushell's study has shown, the Ethiopian ascetics display many of the bodily characteristics shared by Athanasius' Antony. Moreover, many of these ascetics were aware of the effects of their fasting, whether they attributed such effects to the regimen itself, or to God's direct intervention. Thus, though it must be said that a heightened potential for longevity was more than an unintended consequence, longevity *per se* was not the desired outcome. Nowhere in Antony's instructions does one encounter words mirroring Marcus Cato's advice to the younger Laelius:

But it is our duty, my young friends, to resist old age; to compensate for its defects by a watchful care; to fight against it as we would fight against disease; to adopt a regimen of heath; to practice moderate

exercise; and to take just enough of food and drink to restore our strength and not to over-burden it.³¹⁸

One encounters such advice today in molecular biologist Dr. Roy L. Walford, author of *The 120 Year Diet* and outspoken advocate of a restricted diet based upon the findings of caloric restriction in the laboratory.³¹⁹ Though Walford does not advocate genetic research in an attempt to uncover the genes activated by caloric restriction, his regime is squarely focused on maximizing one's longevity to attain bodily health and put off death as long as possible, and represents the latest version of the hygienic method so popular during the Great Awakenings in trying to secure a longer, healthier life.

But for Athanasius and Antony, the prospect of a heightened degree of bodily incorruption was a *moral* project whereby one's soul became subservient to the Spirit's guidance, enabling one to rule oneself in a manner that benefited one's body as well. The remaking of one's body by moderation in exercise and fasting was never carried out simply for the sake of longevity, but was infused with a profound moral significance. The desert ascetics believed that the body is indispensable in the formation of one's soul or character, that there can be no transformation of one's soul, no refining of the will, without attending to the body as well. The ascetic who was able to quiet his body was thus better equipped to deal with the depravity of one's will or desires; over time the soul was able to submit to God through prayer, reflection, and bathing one's mind with Scripture. Indeed, disciplining the body through fasting among other practices was the *first* step in self-transformation whereby "the body was allowed to become the discreet mentor of the proud soul."³²⁰ Thus, fasting was integral to, yet subsumed under, the reordering of both the body and soul.

³¹⁸ Cicero, *Cato maior de Senectute* XI, 36, 45.

³¹⁹ *The 120 Year Diet: How to Double Your Vital Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); *Beyond The 120 Year Diet: How to Double Your Vital Years* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2000); Roy L. Walford and Lisa Walford, *The Anti-Aging Plan: The Nutrient-Rich, Low-Calorie Way of Eating for a Longer Life—The Only Diet Scientifically Proven to Extend Your Healthy Years*, 10th Anniversary Edition (New York: Marlowe & Company, 2005).

³²⁰ Brown, *Body and Society*, 237.

Athanasius believed that one could to some degree retard the aging process through asceticism, even though this was not the primary goal. Indeed, it may be of significance that while both Antony and Athanasius saw asceticism as a return to Adam's prelapsarian state, neither refers to a return to antediluvian longevities, as have many ethicists (notably, Michael J. Reiss, as discussed in Chapter 3). Three possible explanations for this silence are worth considering. First, and most simply, it suggests that how long the ascetic lived on this earth was not a matter of primary importance. This seems reasonable given that primary goal of asceticism was a proper reordering of soul and body, that the real benefit enjoyed by Adam was his intimate fellowship with God, though doubtless Adam's body benefited from the intimacy of this relationship. In such a close relationship, the question as to how long one could live was to a large extent irrelevant. Moreover, it is important to remember that the lengthy life spans on earth were also accompanied by a pervasive wickedness which prompted the flood, and most likely shorter life spans. Second, and somewhat paradoxically, the ascetic lifestyle entailed hardships that may have made a longer life less attractive, even as it increased the chances of extending life, and hence the practice of discipline. The ascetic lifestyle increased the probability of a prolonged bodily life which, to some extent, would always entail a struggle against sin. Finally, the promise of a resurrection body may have limited any allusions to an extended life on this earth. For the desert ascetics the goal of returning to the 'natural' state of prelapsarian Adam, even if conceptions of this state were exaggerated or misunderstood, was equally tempered with a view to the resurrection. The narrative by which the ascetic remade his earthly body was firmly rooted in the context of creation, the fall, and redemption. Thus, common to both Antony and Athanasius is a tension between a return *back* to the natural state and a looking *forward* to a resurrection body. Antony observed that partaking of such ascetic disciplines was to already "take on something of that other spiritual body which will be taken on at the resurrection of the just,"³²¹ that the Holy Spirit gives the ascetic works to constrain the soul and the body so "that both may be purified and enter together into their inheritance."³²² Athanasius too, while asserting that Christ's incarnation enables one to return to some state of incorruptibility, observes that this ultimately occurs at the

³²¹ Antony, Letter I: 71, 202.

³²² Chitty, *Letters of Antony*, 2.

resurrection.³²³ Thus, a recovery of the Adamic body had a distinctly eschatological component. A return to one's natural condition was not harking back to Eden, but oriented towards the future resurrection. As Peter Brown notes, "the imagined transformation of the few great ascetics, on earth, spoke to them of the eventual transformation of their own bodies on the day of the Resurrection."³²⁴ These are at least three possible explanations—the ultimate goal of asceticism as the refinement of one's soul, the ascetic's difficult life, and the promise of a resurrection body—which may account for the diminished interest in the length of one's life.

I have argued that longevity via attenuated aging, while recognized as a feature of life in its 'natural' state, was not the primary goal of the desert ascetics. If however, asceticism may represent an alternative route to longevity—though posing the possibility in this manner is somewhat anachronistic—within the Christian narrative of creation, fall, and redemption, a question immediately arises concerning Athanasius' rather elaborate description of prelapsarian life. Though fanciful exegesis concerning Adam's life in paradise was common among the Church Fathers, it is worth noting that Athanasius never considered Adam free from death, but understood physiological decay as part of the natural order as God created it. What remains crucial however is the recognition that a refinement of one's soul or will is intimately bound up with disciplining the body as well. Though Athanasius attributed this heightened bodily incorruption to the work of Christ, it is no less correct to attribute bodily enhancement to a limited diet, even as fasting is incorporated into the larger schema of the transformation of the entire self in the effective reordering of one's body and soul, informed by the Christian narrative of creation, fall, and redemption.

In the final chapter I turn from the Church Fathers to a modern theologian in the person of Karl Barth, whose focus on Jesus Christ as God's elect represents an attempt to overcome the difficulties of individual election and assurance of salvation, the very concerns that made the Puritan way of death so troublesome and ridden with anxiety. Moreover, Barth's christological emphasis locates the model of a perfectly

³²³ Athanasius, *Four Discourses* 2.61, 381.

³²⁴ Brown, *Body and Society*, 222.

ordered body and soul not in the *first* Adam, but the *second*, the man Jesus Christ. With Jesus as *the* man by which humans are judged, he portrayed the disorder of body and soul as the sin of *sloth* that engenders among other things, a profound dissatisfaction with the length of one's life, exposing the inadequacies of contemporary scientific solutions to prolongevity.

Chapter 6: Maintaining Order: Sloth, Care, and Life Extension

“. . . we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.”¹

G. K. Chesterton

“Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”

Luke 12:25 NIV

I have considered Athanasius’ anthropology, with particular reference the bodily incorruptibility and other psychophysiological enhancements attainable through ascetic practices. Moreover, it has been shown that the primary goal of such discipline was a proper re-ordering or reprioritization of one’s body and soul involving a restriction of certain bodily needs in the refinement of the soul, even as it is acknowledged that such practices enabled one to effectively ‘remake’ one’s own body. In this chapter I will argue that the Christian discipline of fasting offers the possibility of retarding the aging process which need not succumb to inadequate conceptions of embodiment inherent in retarding aging, by looking in particular at genetic engineering via pharmacogenetics. By turning attention away from the first Adam and looking instead more closely at the *last* Adam, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:45-49), I will show how the desire to genetically engineer the body to extend one’s span on earth rests upon notions of embodiment revealing a disorder between the body and soul—the very disorder addressed by asceticism and the discipline of fasting—engendering a heightened fear of death and a dissatisfaction with the length of life.

Certainly, while the ascetic regime as understood by Athanasius in relation to Adam’s body and soul offers a counternarrative to the current technological strivings for longevity which are underwritten by particular conceptions of the nature of embodiment, this ascetic regime must nevertheless be balanced by a more thorough

¹ *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1959), 60.

account of the last Adam, Jesus Christ, in order to give an appropriately *Christian* response to life extension. The belief that one might put on a little of that bodily incorruption of first Adam entailing a longer life must be balanced by an account of the second Adam who willingly put on corruptible human flesh, taking upon himself the same earthly limitations to which we are subject, including a finite existence on earth. While it is true that the reality of Jesus Christ and our future bodily resurrection secured by Christ informed Athanasius' accounts of fasting, the *person* of Jesus—particularly the relationship between his body and soul—is in greater need of explication. In this regard, Karl Barth's theological insights regarding the real man Jesus, the second Adam, will provide the needed balance.²

Barth's account of the human person proves instructive in relation to life extension for several reasons. First, Barth's understanding of the human being is thoroughly infused with a profound recognition of death and human limitedness. Fergus Kerr has rightly noted that "no theologian has written about the finite conditions of human existence more often or at greater length than Karl Barth."³ Barth was acutely aware of our desire for long life in the face of its sheer brevity: "But is not long life in itself merely a fragment which cries out for continuation?"⁴ He struggled to come to terms with the fact that he would one day be buried as "a thing that is superfluous and disturbing in the land of the living."⁵ Elsewhere he confessed that

it is indeed unpleasant to think that some day I shall be a corpse who others will leave and go home chatting after they have heaped wreaths and flowers and poured out kind words and music upon me. It is indeed unpleasant to think that my place will then be in a coffin or urn a few feet below the surface of the ground. It is indeed an unpleasant thought that for a time I will then be missed up above in the daylight, but that I will be finally extinguished from human memory when the last of those who knew me has gone the same way.⁶

² Jesus Christ is so central in Barth's theology, that he actually refers to Christ as the first Adam and the created Adam as the second, *CD IV/1*, 512 ff.

³ *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity* (London: SPCK, 1997), 23. Barth takes up the discussion of our limitedness with regards to time in *CD III/2*, 437-640.

⁴ *CD III/2*, 589.

⁵ *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: SCM Press, 1949), 117-118.

⁶ *CD III/4*, 589.

Secondly, while Barth's reflections on the limited nature of human existence reveal a strong existential component, all attempts to make sense of death and finitude are firmly grounded in his Christology. Indeed, he was sharply critical of any Cartesian-like anthropology rooted in the subjectivities of human experience *in abstracto*.⁷ Rather, our existence and nature, insists Barth, must be explained and understood in light of Jesus,' for to assert otherwise would inevitably lead to a docetic Christ.⁸ Thus, when it comes then to our own finite existence, "we look at this man, who like us has lived a limited life in its restricted time, when we adopt our understanding of the nature of man in respect of his temporality."⁹ This is no less true when considering the desire for more life. Once again, "we keep to the determination of man revealed in Him when we accept man's craving for life as such."¹⁰ Yet, while Jesus lived in 'restricted time,' his resurrection revealed his true identity as the 'Lord of Time,' the alpha and omega, a fact which will have considerable implications in considering our limited time in light of Jesus,' who is both before *and* after us.¹¹

Finally, Barth presents his Christological anthropology in terms relating Jesus' body and soul that could equally be described as anti-Cartesian in nature. Though Barth's opposition to Cartesian thought relates primarily to epistemology, his anthropology challenges the very dualism that underwrites so many of the practices of modern medicine. Barth entertains no notions of the human as composed of an eternal thinking immaterial part (*res cogitans*) and a finite body (*res extensa*) which are essentially independent of each other,¹² but rather speaks of a particular order of soul and body, derived once again from the order displayed in the real man Jesus, an order in unity which we often fail to maintain, revealing sinful attitudes toward our own limitedness, the very limitedness that anti-aging technologies are seeking to overcome.

⁷ CD I/1, 195 ff. See also Fergus Kerr, "Cartesianism according to Karl Barth," *New Blackfriars* 77 (July/August 1996): 358-368; Robert E. Cushman, "Barth's Attack upon Cartesianism and the Future in Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 36 (October 1956): 207-223.

⁸ CD III/2, 132. "We should be thinking . . . docetically in Christology, if we proposed to ascribe to human nature as it exists in us and in Jesus a difference of constitution," CD III/2, 54.

⁹ CD III/2, 571.

¹⁰ CD III/2, 571.

¹¹ CD III/2, 440 ff., 571.

¹² *Discourse on Method*, Part 5.

Barth on Asceticism and the Dis-integration of Body and Soul

Karl Barth's anthropology is relentlessly Christological. Particularly interesting is Barth's discussion of the disorder or disintegration of body and soul as evidenced by the pervasive sin of sloth (*Trägheit*). Unlike Athanasius and the other Church Fathers however, such the determination of this disorder comes not from first Adam, but the *last* Adam, Jesus Christ. Thus, the proper ordering of one's soul and body is not to be found in, or represented as a return to the primeval, prelapsarian state of Adam, which Barth compressed to a mere moment of pre-history or saga, but is found in Jesus Christ.¹³ This is not to suggest that Barth is in opposition to Athanasian christology. For though Athanasius emphasized the return to Adam's prelapsarian state, it must be noted that his recognition of such a return had its basis in the incarnation. Thus, in Barth's discussion of the disorder of body and soul there are parallels to Athanasius' and Antony's thought, but with added implications concerning desire for increased longevity. Hence, for an adequate understanding of the disorder of body and soul and the resulting maladies afflicting humankind, it is critical to consider the proper order and relationship between body and soul as found in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Body-Soul Relationship in the Real Man Jesus

For Barth, an adequate theological anthropology can be based on no one other than *the* man Jesus himself.¹⁴ Any attempt to understand humanity starting from observable human phenomena apart from Jesus Christ leads to a confused and vicious circle of understanding giving rise to a phantom man, for such phenomena are neutral, relative and ambiguous.¹⁵ Wary of the reductionist anthropology of

¹³ Barth, *CD* IV/1, 508 ff.

¹⁴ *CD* III/2, 44. Therefore, "in our exposition of the doctrine of man we must always look in the first instance at the nature of the man as it confronts us in the person of Jesus and only secondarily—asking and answering from this place of light—at the nature of man as that of every man and all other men," *CD* III/2, 46. An earlier, similar formulation is found in Barth, *Ethics*, ed. Dietrich Braun, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 461.

¹⁵ *CD* III/2, 76. "No definition of human nature can meet our present need if it is merely an assertion and description of immediately accessible and knowable characteristics of the nature which man thinks he can regard as that of his fellows and therefore of man in general. . . . who is the man who wants to know himself and thinks he can? How does he reach the platform from which he thinks he can see himself?" *CD* III/2, 75. See also Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Weiser (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1960), 56-57; Wolf Krötke, "The Humanity of the Human Person in Karl Barth's Anthropology," trans. Philip G. Ziegler, in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 159-160. It is not that Barth is opposed to what the social and hard sciences have to say about humanity, but that

scientific materialism on the one hand and the uncritical appropriation of Greek dualism throughout the history of Christianity on the other, Barth put forward what has been termed a ‘dynamic anthropology’¹⁶ or a ‘dialectical-dialogical’ with respect to the body and soul.¹⁷ To understand the relationship between body and soul, we must look to the one true man, Jesus. Thus, “the ontological determination of humanity is grounded in the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus.”¹⁸ The man Jesus is the one whole man, “embodied soul and besouled body [*leibhafte Seele, beseelter Leib*],”¹⁹ by whom we judge what it means to have a soul and a body.²⁰ Unlike Antony and the rest of fallen humanity, in Jesus there is no war or “ascetic conflict” between the body and the soul, for the Spirit of God resting on *this* whole man Jesus renders asceticism “superfluous.”²¹ Thus, says Barth, there is no opposition between the body and the soul; in Jesus this meeting of the ‘willing spirit’ and ‘weak flesh’ (Matthew 26:41) operates in favor of the Spirit.

The exaltation, the logicalising and rationalising of the flesh, which is the mystery of His humanity, does not permit His body to become the enemy and conqueror of His soul; nor does it consist in the soul masquerading as the enemy or conqueror of the body. . . . On the contrary, we are confronted by the picture of peace between these two moments of human existence.²²

There can be no discussion of Jesus’ body without speaking of his soul, and of his soul without speaking of his body. Yet, in this order of peace there is a first and a

such findings must be critiqued from a christological vantage point which by nature involves faith assumptions. See Stuart McLean, *Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 28-29.

¹⁶ Daniel J. Price, *Karl Barth’s Anthropology in Light of Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 9, 20-22, esp. 234-244. However, Price notes that this term primarily applies to Barth’s understanding of the *imago Dei* in view of the relational aspect of the Trinity, 9-10.

¹⁷ McLean, *Humanity*, 13. That is, “no part [body or soul] can be understood without the other, although distinctions are made and priorities given. There is unity, difference and order,” 44.

¹⁸ *CD III/2*, 132.

¹⁹ *CD III/2*, 327, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. III, *Die Lehre von der Schöpfung* (part 2) (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1948), 394 [hereafter *KD III/2*].

²⁰ Barth derives this from Galatians 1:4; 2:20 where Jesus gave himself (ἐαυτόν) for our sins, giving up his soul (ψύχη) for us (Matthew 20:28; John 10: 11, 15; 1 John 3:16) and his body (σῶμα) for us (Luke 22:19; Hebrews 10:10), *CD III/2*, 328ff.

²¹ *CD III/2*, 338; see also 336.

²² *CD III/2*, 338.

second: his soul is first as the commander and controller of his body, and his body second as obedient and that which is controlled by his soul, and not *vice versa*.

Jesus spoke and acted and suffered in obedience and omnipotence in and not without His body, so that He was also wholly this body. Yet His action and passion are first, *a parte potiori*, those of His soul, and in that way and on that basis of His body. His body is used and governed by Him for the purpose of a specific and conscious speech and action and suffering. It serves Him in the execution of His purpose. It is impregnated with soul, i.e., a body filled with this consciousness; but we obviously cannot say that his soul is impregnated with body, i.e., a soul filled by the needs and desires of His bodily life. This is the distinction and inequality to be noted within the oneness and the wholeness. The fulfilment, the willing and the execution and therefore the true movement of his body occurs from above downwards, from the soul to body and not *vice versa*.²³

Hence, any theological discussion of humanity “must begin with the picture of this man.”²⁴

Humanity in Light of the Real Man Jesus

Based on the man Jesus, so too the human person is the soul of her organic, living body (*Leib*). That is, the soul enlivens a material body (*Körper*), making it an organic body (*Leib*). “The organic body [*Leib*] is distinguished from the purely material body [*Körper*] by the fact that . . . it is besouled and filled and controlled by independent life.”²⁵ Apart from this ensouling, the person would be ‘subjectless;’ the soul is not a soul unless it has an organic body. At the same time, says Barth, “I cannot be myself without at the same time being my body.”²⁶ Barth refers to this understanding of the human as “concrete reality” or “concrete monism,” where the soul and body are not understood as two ‘parts’ or ‘substances,’ but “as two moments of the indivisibility one human nature, the soul as that which quickens and the body as that which is quickened and lives.”²⁷ This ordering of soul and body is sustained by the Spirit,

²³ CD III/2, 339.

²⁴ CD III/2, 344.

²⁵ CD III/2, 378; Krötke, “The Humanity of the Human Person,” 170.

²⁶ Krötke, “The Humanity of the Human Person,” 170, observes that this sentence is missing in the English translation of CD III/2, and has therefore provided it.

²⁷ CD III/2, 393, 399, 417.

understood as “the immediate action of God Himself, which grounds, constitutes and maintains man as the soul of his body.”²⁸ While man has Spirit, the Spirit is not identical to man.²⁹ Any abstraction of the human from the Spirit abstracts the human from the relationship of the living Creator—whether or not he or she is aware of this relationship—and can only result in the “puzzling duality” between the mortal body and the immortal soul.³⁰ As in the man Jesus the soul has a certain primacy to the body, so too the soul is superior in humanity. The soul is superior to the body because the Spirit stands in a “special and direct” relationship to the soul while in an indirect relationship to the body. Thus, “the soul is *a priori* the element in which the turning of God to man and the fellowship of man with God in some way take place.”³¹ However, “the same is to be said of the body, but only *a posteriori*.”³² Therefore, the body and soul have functions or operations that, while not operating in exclusivity to the other, have their primacy in either the body or soul.

Though the human person is a concrete monism, embodied soul and besouled body, there are two basic operations that find their primacy in either the soul or the body, but never in exclusion of the other. The human is (1) a percipient being and (2) an active being. As a percipient being, the human carries out the functions of thought and awareness. Though thought is related to the soul and awareness to the body, thought does not happen without the body. Similarly, awareness does not occur without the soul. The functions of thought and awareness cannot be distributed

²⁸ CD III/2, 393. Earlier Barth defined the Spirit of God’s being as “an action and attitude of the Creator in relation to his creation,” 356. See also 359. Ray S. Anderson, “On Being Human: The Spiritual Saga of a Creaturely Soul,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?: Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, ed. Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 186, has perhaps identified “contingent monism” as a more appropriate term to describe both the unity of body and soul and the work of the Spirit in sustaining this unity, and hence life.

²⁹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1979), notes that the English translation does not consistently capitalize ‘Spirit’ which would have helped emphasize that this is referring to the Spirit of God, given that Barth rejects a trichotomy in man, 132.

³⁰ CD III/2, 393. “So long as soul and body are spoken of as two independent and distinct substances, no real insight is possible,” 292-293. However, so long as one holds to the premise that “man is as he has Spirit,” one has a “Christian dualism of soul and body,” 394.

³¹ CD III/2, 365.

³² CD III/2, 365.

exclusively to the soul or the body.³³ Rather, the man “as soul of his *body* is empowered for awareness, and as *soul* of his body for thought.”³⁴ However, when considering man’s act in totality, the soul is primary in both awareness and thinking.³⁵ Similarly, as (2) an active being, the human being desires and wills. While desiring and willing can only be separated conceptually, “there is indeed a special relation of desiring to the bodily nature of man, and of willing to the soul.”³⁶ Thus, while desire is an intrinsically bodily process which arouses likes or dislikes, “it is I who decide and determine my relation to my desiring.”³⁷ To will is to make up one’s mind. Therefore, as with awareness and thought, “man desires as the soul of his *body*, and wills as the *soul* of his body,” though again the soul is primary in both willing and desiring.³⁸ There can be no desiring without the soul, as there can be no willing without the body. Since all of humankind is called and claimed by God in its totality, says Barth, if a man properly understands himself in relation to God, he cannot understand himself as primarily soul, primarily body, or any form of dualism. Rather, he is to be understood as a single acting subject.

If man understands himself in his relation to God as established and ordained by God, in relation to soul and body as the two moments of his being he can in no case understand himself as a dual but only as a single subject, as soul identical with his body and as body identical with his soul.³⁹

Thus, “man does not exist except in his life-act [*Lebensakt*],” where he is at every moment soul and body, “but always soul first and then body, always ruling soul [*regierende Seele*] and serving body [*dienender Leib*].”⁴⁰ Having reviewed Barth’s christological anthropology, I discuss the disorder of the soul and the body as determined by the order of this man Jesus.

³³ CD III/2, 401.

³⁴ CD III/2, 400. “. . . we must speak of the primacy of the soul in relation to the two functions of awareness and thinking. The soul—the soul of the body, but still the soul and not the body—is the man himself, the human subject.”

³⁵ CD III/2, 405.

³⁶ CD III/2, 408.

³⁷ CD III/2, 409.

³⁸ CD III/2, 416, 418.

³⁹ CD III/2, 426.

⁴⁰ CD III/2, 426-427 [*KD* III/2, 512].

The Sin of Sloth: *Trägheit*

Unlike Jesus, “wholly Himself, the soul of His body in its free control, the body of His soul in its free service,” we experience a disruption in the order between the body and soul.⁴¹ While the soul is always the leader of the body, the acting subject and life, in our fallen condition we allow the impulses of the body to exercise undue influence on our soul to the extent that we will what we should not, even as the body wills what it should not. Barth determines this particular sin or disorder in light of Jesus’ humanity, calling it sloth or *Trägheit*,⁴² alternately understood as sluggishness, indolence, or inertia, taking the form of both evil action and evil inaction.⁴³ In his sloth man neither trusts nor loves God.⁴⁴ In sloth we refuse our own reality as it confronts in Jesus Christ, refusing to have anything to do with God and refusing the freedom promised us in the man Jesus. This refusal affects (1) our relationship to God, (2) our relationship with humanity, (3) the relationship between the body and the soul, and (4) our relationship to our historical limitation in time.⁴⁵ Given the discussions thus far on the role of asceticism in reordering the body and soul, particular attention will be devoted to the effects of *Trägheit* on the (3) soul-body relationship, and (4) our limited lifespan, before considering the project of life extension in light of our sloth as determined by the reality of Jesus Christ.

***Trägheit* as Body and Soul Dis-integration**

God guarantees this ordered unity of soul and body in his creatures; however, *Trägheit* disturbs and disrupts this unity, resulting in a dualism between the psychical (*geistig-seelischen*) and the physical (*leiblich-natürlichen*) elements or moments of the human person.⁴⁶ In considering the human being as soul of his body, says Barth, this particular form of *Trägheit* takes the form of dissipation, and is simply

⁴¹ CD IV/2, , 452; 460.

⁴² “Wir antworten jetzt: des Menschen Sünde is des Menschen Trägheit,” *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. IV, *Die Lehre von der Versöhnung* (part 2) (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1955), 452 [hereafter KD IV/2].

⁴³ CD IV/2, 403.

⁴⁴ CD IV/2, 405.

⁴⁵ CD IV/2, 409. *Trägheit* thus takes the form of (1) stupidity, (2) inhumanity, (3) dissipation, and (4) care or anxiety respectively.

⁴⁶ KD IV/2, 474.

indiscipline (*Disziplinlosigkeit*).⁴⁷ Sin in the form of sloth means that man lets himself fall, lets himself go, lets himself be moved and pushed. By contrast, to live authentically means “to keep oneself disciplined, . . . to be what one is as a man even at the cost of severity against oneself.”⁴⁸ However, we are vagabonds who refuse to accept and exercise discipline ourselves, though we freely impose it on others. By giving ourselves permissions rather than commands, the unity of the body and the soul suffers disruption and disintegration. The body and soul

begin to go their separate ways. His soul will no longer control his body, nor his body obey his soul. The two not only contradict one another in their mutual relationship, but also, refusing their distinct function in this relationship, contradict their own essence as the two integrated elements of human nature. If the dissipated man wills, as he does, to be without spirit, he has entered on the irresistible way on which he will finally be soulless and bodiless; the way which can lead only to death.⁴⁹

Barth says that we are lazy creatures who shun and hate discipline. We take pleasure in decomposing our human nature by either relieving our soul of its role “as the ruler and guardian and preserver of our body” by pursuing a spiritual or inward life, or we “release our body from the service of our soul and give it free rein to pursue its own impulses and needs.”⁵⁰ In practice, says Barth, we hover like vagabonds somewhere between these two possibilities, doing even both at once. It is very easy, asserts Barth, to live under the illusion that releasing the soul from exercising its responsibility as the body’s keeper on the one hand, and releasing the body from the service and control of the soul on the other, is really a liberation from a twofold bondage. In reality however, *either* choice is a lapse into dualism, a ‘twofold Docetism,’ and is essentially choosing the flesh.⁵¹ Again, the vagabond in us wishes to view the discipline that guards against such release in either direction as an unnecessary and foreign rule that must be abandoned. “Is not the discipline which prevents these releases a kind of foreign rule which man does not need to accept,

⁴⁷ CD IV/2, 454 [KD IV/2, 511].

⁴⁸ CD IV/2, 454.

⁴⁹ CD IV/2, 454.

⁵⁰ CD IV/2, 456.

⁵¹ CD IV/2, 459.

which—far from exercising—he can and must repudiate?”⁵² We are self-deceived by lapsing into a dualism whereby we come to believe that to be truly human is either to be liberated from the body, or to gratify and celebrate its impulses. If our sloth enables the body and soul to ‘go their separate ways,’ it also affects our perception of time.

***Trägheit* and Our Limited Span of Life**

Trägheit not only involves a disintegration of body and soul, but impacts our attitude towards our limited lifespan. According to Barth, *Trägheit* means that “our allotted duration of human life will become quite unendurable.”⁵³ This inability to accept our own limited lifespan is a “direct consequence of the destruction and disintegration of human nature, of being in the flesh.”⁵⁴ As such, the dissipated man cannot accept death as the determination of human existence, and is therefore constantly seeking a flight from a unified and whole life, pursuing either an upward (idealistic) or downward (materialistic) path. Our desires know no limits; the desire of our every aim is infinity, whose satisfaction leads only to more desire. Whether one pursues the ‘upward’ path or the ‘downward’ path, “it opens up magic casements with unlimited views which give us the thrill either of solemnity or of an arrogant rejoicing.”⁵⁵ However, notes Barth, the thrill afforded by these opening casements in the face of infinity is actually a thrill of horror when we realize our own limitedness. As such, the dissipated man seeks solace in the exclamation *Carpe diem*, which is nothing more than an expression of panic when faced with the closed door that he wishes to remain open.⁵⁶ Moreover, this dissipated man of sloth whose body and soul are in a state of disintegration cannot understand that his desires cannot be satisfied.

There is no infinite to satisfy our infinite desires. But this is something which the dissipated man, who has broken loose from the unity and totality of soul and body in which God has created him for existence in the limit of his time, cannot grasp, but must endlessly repudiate in his own endless dissatisfaction. In what he takes to be his successful

⁵² CD IV/2, 460.

⁵³ CD IV/2, 462.

⁵⁴ CD IV/2, 462.

⁵⁵ CD IV/2, 463.

⁵⁶ CD IV/2, 463.

hunt, he is himself the one who is hunted with terrible success by anxiety.⁵⁷

History, Barth tells us, is testimony to our grasping of the infinite through politics, art, culture, and scientific achievements.

But if *Trägheit* in the form of (3) the divided, dualistic, and dissipated human whose body and soul are in disorder, manifests itself in the dissatisfaction of our limited lifespan, so too *Trägheit* as (4) a dissatisfaction with our finite lifespan leads to a separation of the body and soul. Barth understands *Trägheit* in this final form as anxiety or ‘care’ (*Sorge*). Care is the fear of death without God, without hope, and inevitably the source of all evil. Care also “leads no less necessarily to the disorder which we have called the disintegration of the disciplined unity [*der disziplinierten Einheit*] of man as the soul of his body.”⁵⁸ In fact, “so strong is the self-contradiction into which the anxious man plunges himself in his discontent with his finitude that it is inevitable that this unity [of body and soul] should be severely jeopardized.”⁵⁹ In the fear of his impending and hopeless death, he simply cannot be a whole man, “he can no longer rule as a soul or serve as a body.”⁶⁰ While Barth asserts that it is *good* that we should age and eventually die in light of the reality of creaturely existence as revealed in the real man Jesus, the dissipated man is gripped with fear.⁶¹

When man is under the influence of care or *Sorge*, his soul flees to invented regions of his own making and his body reacts to this hopeless death in various forms of self-assertion, renunciation, or sickness, acts which result in the dissolution of his body and soul. More generally, we seek to conceal the fact of our own death either by plunging ourselves into unceasing conscientious work attempting to make ourselves

⁵⁷ CD IV/2, 463.

⁵⁸ CD IV/2, 477 [KD IV/2, 540]. For a further description of *Sorge*, see CD IV/2, 468, 477, esp. 472.

⁵⁹ CD IV/2, 477.

⁶⁰ CD IV/2, 477.

⁶¹ “Rather than tolerating our own limitation with a sigh, we have every reason to take it seriously, to affirm it, to accept it, and to praise God for the fact that in it we are what we are and not something else,” CD III/4, 568. John Webster has noted that Barth’s ethical concerning our freedom in limitation in CD III/4 is a lengthy argument to demonstrate “that such limitation *specifies* rather than *hems in* the creature.” See *Barth’s Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth’s Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 115.

masters in things great and small, or by sinking into a law of relaxation and passivity, adopting a lifestyle that mirrors the ‘lilies of the field.’⁶² It is certainly possible to construe the project of aging retardation as ‘unceasing conscientious work,’ an assertion of the naked will over against the passive, undisciplined, aging body. Moreover, it is not difficult to see this project as driven by a deep discontent of finitude under the influence of *Sorge*, that admixture of anxiety, apprehension and desire, whereby death and the decline preceding it are viewed as the ultimate threat. But the reality that *Sorge* suppresses, says Barth, is that Christ lives at the very frontier where our time runs out; our existence and our inevitable perishing is set in light of the man Jesus, who because he was mortal in his humanity, affirms our perishing and finite existence as part of the good order of God.⁶³ While Barth admits that care will not work itself out so crudely or abruptly, it is clear that *Trägheit* as (3) the disintegration of the body and soul and *Trägheit* as (4) as a profound discontent with one’s limited lifespan (*Sorge*) are mutually reinforcing. Just as the disintegration of body and soul engenders dissatisfaction with our limited span and a fear of death, so too our dissatisfaction with our finitude and fear of death lead to the disintegration of body and soul. *Sorge*—“the disruption of the right relationship of man to his temporality”—is both the consequence and the cause of the disorder and disintegration of body and soul.⁶⁴

If, as Barth has suggested, the correct order of the body-soul relationship in man is one of a disciplined unity (*der disziplinierten Einheit*),⁶⁵ a unity undermined by *Trägheit* which is simply indiscipline (*Disziplinlosigkeit*),⁶⁶ then it would seem that applying discipline in the Christian life offers a means by which the believer might properly re-order the soul and body which in turn has implications for one’s view of one’s limited lifespan. Hence, discipline or asceticism, understood as a proper re-

⁶² CD IV/2, 470.

⁶³ CD IV/2, 468-469. See also CD III/2, 630-632; CD III/4, 592. For Barth’s exposition of our limited time as preserved by God and part of his good order, see CD III/3, 61 f., 83 f., 226-238. A helpful summary of the human person in limited time is offered by Krötke, “The Humanity of the Human Person,” 171-173. See also Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 99-123.

⁶⁴ CD IV/2, 475.

⁶⁵ CD IV/2, 477 [KD IV/2, 540].

⁶⁶ CD IV/2, 454 [KD IV/2, 511].

ordering of body and soul, might significantly thwart our tendency towards the sin of *Trägheit*, and hence our desire to live on indefinitely. Before considering this argument further, an investigation of Barth's view of discipline in the form of asceticism will prove useful.

Barth on Discipline and Asceticism

That Barth freely speaks of *Trägheit* as a lack of discipline (*Disziplinlosigkeit*) does not mean however, that he approves of ascetic practices. In his *Doctrine of Creation*, Barth discussed asceticism in the context of the body and soul. He readily admits that human life in its psycho-physical structure is a life of 'primitive' or 'animal' impulses—hunger, the need for sex, and sleep—which must be dealt with 'humanly.'⁶⁷ Those who give free reign to their impulses are 'sub-animal,' as even animals instinctively know when their needs are adequately satiated, whereas humans are capable of engaging in 'hypertrophies of satisfaction,' to which unfettered impulses tend.⁶⁸ Sounding very much like Antony, Barth says that our animal impulses are to be viewed as "the form of a physical process guided and governed by the soul as awakened by the divine *pneuma*, and therefore in the form of freely chosen and executed decisions."⁶⁹ Though one's impulses are neither automatic nor given so that they might simply be suppressed, Barth concedes that

serious, and sometimes radical restrictions, renunciations, abstentions and sacrifices may well be demanded from us by His decrees and commands in the whole field of our impulsive life.⁷⁰

He refers to this legitimate suppression of one's impulses as asceticism (*Askese*), which he defines as

a form of a partial or complete renunciation of the gratification of the needs in question . . . as a means of disciplining the corresponding impulses, perhaps also for the sake of the higher necessities of life, and above all for the sake of one's neighbours.⁷¹

⁶⁷ CD III/4, 345.

⁶⁸ CD III/4, 345.

⁶⁹ CD III/4, 345.

⁷⁰ CD III/4, 346.

⁷¹ CD III/4, 346, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. III, *Die Lehre von der Schöpfung* (part 4) (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1951), 393 [hereafter *KD* III/4].

Barth acknowledges that the Bible actually encourages one to eat and drink and live ‘naturally,’ observing that eternal life itself is represented as a great feast (Matthew 22:10).⁷² Moreover, he notes that Paul’s command to mortify (~~nekrwsate~~) one’s earthly members (Colossians 3:5) must be understood in the context of Paul’s earlier warning against false religious humility involving a harsh treatment of the body which is ineffective in restraining one’s sensual appetite (Colossians 2:23). Aware that “a powerful ascetic can be a vessel of much greater wickedness than even the most indulgent,” Barth is wary of both excessive repression and unrestrained liberality.⁷³ Thus, with regard to the impulsive life there are two unacceptable extremes, “an *abusus in excessu* and an *abusus in defectu*” which are not to be compromised or combined, for “man cannot wish either to surrender to the power of his impulsive life or to rid himself of it.”⁷⁴ The middle path avoids both extremes whereby one has freedom for life. The particular practices composing middle path however, are not specified.

Barth appears to take a more skeptical attitude towards asceticism in his brief discussion on the development of monasticism in the opening of the second part of the *Doctrine of Reconciliation* in dealing with God’s reconciliation in Jesus as a movement from below to above. Barth’s brief look at the history of humanity’s various attempts to effect this reconciliation lead him to consider monasticism in its various early forms.⁷⁵ Barth is critical of both the motives or intentions that gave birth to asceticism as well as the institutions to which such practices gave rise, reserving harsher criticism for the latter.⁷⁶ Barth understands monasticism primarily as a flight from the world and other people, exemplified by that “quite unfounded and radical unrest” of those anchorites who fled to the deserts of Egypt in the late

⁷² CD III/4, 347.

⁷³ CD III/4, 348.

⁷⁴ CD III/4, 348.

⁷⁵ CD IV/2, 11-12, 18. Barth first mentions asceticism when distinguishing between religion and revelation, assigning asceticism to the former insofar as it is an attempt for man to reconcile himself to God. CD I/2, 308-309.

⁷⁶ CD IV/2, 11-12. He also draws a distinction between the original exponents and the successors, in favor of the former, as the latter invariably confused and distorted the primary issues.

third century.⁷⁷ Barth is largely critical of these Egyptian anchorites, and notes that the early Christians' flight away from the things of the world into the desert need not have anything to do with Christianity; much less is one required to flee 'up and off into the desert' to become a Christian. A flight from this world is not necessarily a flight to God. For, Barth asserts "one thing is for sure—that even in his hut or cave the hermit will never be free from the most dangerous representative of the world, i.e., himself."⁷⁸ True enough. But Barth seems to miss that this was *precisely* the point of fleeing: not to come face to face with the desolate landscape of the desert, but to come face to face with the far bleaker landscape of one's own heart. Flight *from* the world was a flight to a place where one could *not* escape oneself, aware of how easy it is to immerse oneself in daily activities as a means by which to avoid or suppress the darker realities of our habits, thoughts, and inclinations. While Barth is critical of anchoritic monasticism for its flight mentality, he recognizes other early ascetics like Origen who did not withdraw from society. Moreover, he is also aware that many ascetics formed communities in a type of coenobitic monasticism, with Antony as the most notable exception.⁷⁹

Despite these objections however, Barth concedes that one must still face whether there might be a certain special, inward, withdrawal from the world apart from making it some sort of monastic law of practice, asking

can there be either for the Church or for individuals any genuine approach to the world or men unless there is an equally genuine retreat? Has there not to be (not merely a healthy but a spiritually necessary) rhythm in this matter, in which there will always be a place for **ajnacwrein** [ascetic withdrawal]?⁸⁰

⁷⁷ CD IV/2, 12.

⁷⁸ CD IV/2, 12. Barth also allows that some anchorites may have fled to the desert as a protest against the worldly church, 13-14. Later however Barth considers 'monasticism' whereby the Christian seeks to become a witness to the world "by holding as far aloof from it as possible, or at least from its tendencies, habits, and forms of life," an unacceptable extreme. See *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV/4, Lecture Fragments* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 197. Immediately following however, in what was excised typescript, Barth allows that sometimes the Christian may be called to withdraw into some form of monk-like existence in obedience to a special command in a special situation, 197-198, though he elaborates no further.

⁷⁹ CD IV/2, 13. Nevertheless, it is clear that Antony had increasing contact with the outside world as his fame spread.

⁸⁰ CD IV/2, 14.

In pursuing this question, Barth turns from monasticism as an organized system, to asceticism (**ajḥkhsi**"), which he understands as "exercise or training for the successful attainment of a goal."⁸¹ He asserts that asceticism that prohibits particular practices may serve to liberate one from those passions or 'inordinate desires' which are a constant threat, like the desires for sex, money, or possessions. Abstention from these particular practices are "meant to serve the liberation of man from the downward drag of sin."⁸² Indeed, this 'negative principle' is the reverse side of the positive principle; namely, that "this liberation itself is to serve the redemptive and exclusively necessary freedom of man for God and his fellows, for the Church and therefore for the world."⁸³ However, Barth immediately questions the arbitrary nature of the aforementioned abstentions (a list which, incidentally, excludes abstention from food), acknowledging that it is possible to engage in such abstentions without affecting one's character.

Is not the ordering of these inordinate desires, and its goal of Christian freedom for Christian service, really a matter of the heart, which may still be lacking in spite of this sealing off, or may be there without it? Is there no passion or inertia of the heart which is not stronger and more influential than all the passion or inertia of sex or property, for all their rigid exclusion?⁸⁴

Thus, Barth is concerned to point out that abstention from particular desires, and "the mechanical sealing off of these whole spheres," will not provide sufficient relief from our desires, and may not leave us open to the commandment of God.⁸⁵

Though skeptical of the various forms of monastic theology, Barth asserts that the question regarding Christian perfection and dedication to an aim (**teleiōth**") cannot under any circumstances be suppressed—even by an appeal to the *sola fides* by which the Christian is justified (and sanctified) in the sight of God. Barth wonders, given our temptation to lose heart in the areas of sex and money and possessions, whether monasticism can be blamed for exercising such strictness. A more favorable scenario is the monk who unceasingly battles the lusts of his flesh while remaining

⁸¹ CD IV/2, 14.

⁸² CD IV/2, 14.

⁸³ CD IV/2, 14.

⁸⁴ CD IV/2, 15.

⁸⁵ CD IV/2, 15.

active in spiritual and physical labor, the arts and scholarship, social work and teaching, and ultimately the monastic *opus Dei*—the adoration of God in private and communal worship.⁸⁶ Such a monk, “could and can positively attest something of that freedom for God and his fellows which is supposed to be the *telos* of monastic asceticism.”⁸⁷ Barth asks how the Christian life of freedom for God *cannot*, to some degree, be an ascetic life.

We have finally to ask whether there can be any Christian existence at all in Christian freedom, in that direction to the goal set for man by the grace of God, whether there can be any worship of God in Spirit and in truth or genuine service to our fellows, whether there can be any fitness for it, without an acceptance of the conflict in these spheres, without definite renunciations and abstentions, and therefore without asceticism [*Askese*]*—not perhaps an asceticism in principle and subject to rule, but all the more serious on that account. This certainly seems to be an impossibility in the Gospels and according to the nature of the case, both individually and collectively. Only those who can and will sacrifice can and will serve and are free to do so.*⁸⁸

Barth’s primary concern with systematic or monastic asceticism is that particular practices still leave human beings free for God, and that such practices are never construed as means of attaining salvation, perfection, or even sanctification. The Christian must remember that such practices are made available for sanctification *on account of* God’s salvation and sanctification *already* opened up through Jesus Christ,⁸⁹ for *Trägheit* is essentially a denial of our being in Jesus Christ. Because of our sloth, we “refuse to be those we already are in Him, hesitating to make use of the Spirit in the flesh which we are given in Him.”⁹⁰ Thus the goal of asceticism is not freedom *from* desires (as if this were possible) in an attempt to gain God’s favor, but freedom *for* God and the obedience that such discipleship entails, and thus freedom *for* one’s fellow creatures. Unfortunately, Barth does not speak of asceticism within the context of one’s soul and body. It is also unclear how exactly asceticism (*Askese*) relates to discipline (*Disziplin*), though they are certainly related. Barth tends to

⁸⁶ CD IV/2, 15-16.

⁸⁷ CD IV/2, 16.

⁸⁸ CD IV/2, 16 [KD IV/2, 15-16].

⁸⁹ CD IV/2, 517ff. Key passages are 1 Corinthians 6: 9-11; Colossians 1:21-23.

⁹⁰ CD IV/2, 452. On account of this sloth, “. . . we fail to recognize and to exist as those who we already are in and by that One.”

reserve the term asceticism when speaking of particular abstentions while he understands the exercise of discipline as “simply the obedience that we owe to God.”⁹¹ Certainly, there is little reason to doubt that the Christian life calls for abstentions, renunciations and hence for some form of asceticism. This has implications, as will be discussed shortly, for the formation of Christian character, including the sloth and care which hinder our obedience to Christ and create a dissatisfaction with our limited life span.

The remainder of this chapter offers an analysis of the current attempts to retard the human aging process to extend the healthy lifespan in light of Barth’s conception of sloth and care—*Trägheit* and *Sorge*—in conjunction with the goals of ascetic practices as established by Athanasius and Antony. Specifically I will construe current efforts at life extension as the epitome of *Sorge*, driven by fear of death and decay and a dissatisfaction with one’s temporal limit, suggesting that the body and soul are already ‘out of order.’ Moreover, I will attempt to show that current attempts of life extension can be traced historically to just such a separation of body and soul (*Trägheit*), driven by anxiety over death and decay (*Sorge*). Against the backdrop of an ascetic ‘remaking’ of the body as understood by Athanasius and Antony in the Christian quest for holiness, the genetic search for the retardation of aging will be shown to be seriously deficient in failing to address the sin of *Trägheit* as a separation of body and soul. Finally, insofar as *Trägheit* may be characterized as a lack of discipline (*Disziplinlosigkeit*), it will be argued that the fear of death and dissatisfaction with our limited span of life (*Sorge*) can be mitigated by ‘reordering’ the body as the effective servant of the Word-guided soul, and that such reordering is best accomplished by the practice of discipline necessary for a Christian life of holiness before God.

Life Extension As a Project of Care

Though Barth understands *Trägheit* as a sloth that takes the form of *Sorge* or anxiety with respect to our temporal earthly existence, sloth hardly appears as an appropriate term to describe the current efforts to slow aging via genetic technology in such

⁹¹ CD IV/2, 461.

terms. Even Barth acknowledges that “when it is translated into conscientious work, who can possibly recognize it as a form of human sloth?”⁹² The problem, says Barth, is that our sloth is frequently hidden under a veil of ‘conscientious work.’ Indeed, Jean Bethke Elshtain has recently reflected on the somewhat paradoxical notion of sloth, noting that “busyness, strangely enough, may constitute its own version of laziness, as acquiescence in cultural forms that promote slackness of purpose as every moment of every day is gobbled up in a frenzy of activity.”⁹³ Particularly, in our sloth, “we fret at the inevitable realization that our existence is limited. We would rather things were different. We try to arrest the foot which brings us constantly nearer to this frontier.”⁹⁴ This, says Barth, is our human care. The ‘conscientious work’ of which Barth spoke has taken the form of scientific activity, particularly the genetics of human aging. Extending life by slowing the aging process is the latest attempt to ‘arrest the foot’ which carries us to death by substantially arresting the body’s aging process. Thus, the attempt to slow human aging through genetic technology may be seen as the epitome of an increasing dissatisfaction with our limited duration (at least in affluent western cultures), disguising the bitter fruit of *Trägheit*. Our frenetic search for longevity bears witness to our dissatisfaction with the current healthy lifespan which is as long as it has ever been in postdiluvian history. While this century has witnessed tremendous advances in medicine in treating and even curing diseases and disorders which have limited the human lifespan, this has not proved enough. The real longevity that many seek will not be achieved by defeating disease, but by defeating aging itself.

In the literature surveyed earlier, the notion that our span of life is insufficiently short to meet our aspirations and desires was a common one. Christine Overall made what appears to be a very reasonable assertion, that, “other things being equal, a longer life is a better one, provided that one is in a minimally good state of health.”⁹⁵ It is recognized that “a longer life is the prerequisite for almost everything else that one

⁹² *CD IV/2*, 473.

⁹³ *Who Are We? Critical Reflections and Hopeful Possibilities* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 82.

⁹⁴ *CD IV/2*, 468.

⁹⁵ Overall, “Longevity,” 287.

might want.”⁹⁶ This need not be construed as hedonistic attempt to secure a longer life in the pursuit of pleasure. But the sentiment expressed here captures a wider dissatisfaction with our limited span as healthy, autonomous beings. As one ethicist has put it, “the only concern with health is that the disposition of my body not interfere with my life plan.”⁹⁷ The more one wishes to accomplish and experience, the more death becomes an enemy. Our aging and disintegrating bodies become forceful reminders that our desires and aspirations outstrip the longevity of our bodies, making an enemy of death. Our human existence becomes filled with anxiety, noted Reinhold Niebuhr, when death precludes the accomplishment of our goals, “when *finis* so capriciously frustrates the possibility of achieving *telos*.”⁹⁸

However, death is an enemy not only because it forecloses future possibilities, but also because it is frequently accompanied by physiological decline which threatens our autonomy, and hence one’s ability to pursue the things one desires. As Carl Elliott observes,

we have become accustomed to the idea that the tragedy of aging is physical and mental decline: the soul of a young person trapped in a debilitated, traitorous body. Often it is not Death that we fear so much as the instruments of torture that he carries with him: the degeneration and disability, the creaking joints and aching bones, the loss of stamina and sexual attractiveness.⁹⁹

As advances in science affords an ever-increasing level of control over the body, the loss of control becomes all the more fearful. In this situation the concepts of dignity and autonomy are nearly unequivocal, where a ‘dignified death’ becomes one’s last exercise of autonomy over the failing body. Thus, it is hoped that we might greatly extend the human lifespan and minimize the period of decline by manipulating the genes associated with aging.

⁹⁶ Overall, “Longevity,” 287.

⁹⁷ Joel James Shuman, *The Body of Compassion: Ethics, Medicine, and the Church* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 83.

⁹⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 2, *Human Destiny* (London: Nisbet and Co. Ltd., 1943), 303.

⁹⁹ *Better Than Well*, 276.

The search to uncover the mysteries of aging represent the newest form of the Baconian project understood as the mitigation of disease and even death itself, inspiring awe and increasing both the fear of death and our dissatisfaction with the limits our decaying bodies impose on us. Current attempts to lengthen the human lifespan by manipulating aging itself stem from *Sorge*, our fear of death and decay as evidenced by our dissatisfaction with the increasing average life spans already afforded by advances in science. Moreover, in light of our anxieties it appears that that the body and soul have ‘gone their separate ways.’ The will or soul and its seemingly insatiable capacity for new experiences asserts itself over against the disintegrating and decaying body that cannot ‘keep up.’ That it is now possible to view our bodies as passive material for genetic manipulation in order to add years of bodily health reveals *precisely* such a disintegration of body and soul, even as science methodologically eliminates this tension in the form of a reductionistic materialism whereby consciousness, thoughts, morals, and emotions are considered as mere epiphenomena of the brain.¹⁰⁰ Though Barth does not provide any specific examples of how the fear of death and decay (*Sorge*) contributes to the separation of body and soul (*Trägheit*), one key example can be found at origins of the modern biomedical project in the work of René Descartes.

***Trägheit* and the Birth of Modern Science**

One finds an example of the relationship between *Trägheit* as the separation of body and soul and *Trägheit* as care or anxiety over one’s limited lifespan at the very foundations of modern science in Descartes. While earlier I focused primarily on the work of Francis Bacon and the ‘Baconian Project’ as dubbed by McKenny, Descartes too played a considerable role in the development of modern science in his aforementioned separation of the body (*res extensa*) from the intellect or mind (*res cogitans*).¹⁰¹ It has been suggested that this separation was motivated in part by a fear of death and decay, a fear which contributed to his desire to metaphysically and

¹⁰⁰ This is not to deny that other possibilities exist, namely along the lines of a nonreductive materialism or nonreductive physicalism. Indeed, this thesis is cogently presented in *Whatever Happened to the Soul? See also From Cells To Souls—and Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature*, ed. Malcom Jeeves (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2004).

¹⁰¹ McKenny also implicates Descartes in the Baconian Project, *To Relieve*, 2.

methodologically separate the soul (or mind) from the body. Drew Leder has convincingly argued that Descartes' motivation for extending the human lifespan through increasing knowledge of the body was his fear of death and decay.¹⁰² Leder points out that Descartes' fear of death may have been established very early in his life, as he suffered from a perpetual sickness that had claimed the life of his mother. Moreover, his physicians condemned him to an early death throughout the first twenty years of his life.¹⁰³ Leder points out that Descartes' used a two-pronged approach in his attack against the fear of death whereby the body and soul were methodologically separated. On the one hand, in his *Meditations* Descartes hoped to philosophically establish the existence of God and "that the human soul does not perish with the human body."¹⁰⁴ Leder argues that Descartes' metaphysical explorations are partially motivated by the threat of bodily decay and death. "The *Meditations* is a text inaugurated not only by a confrontation with error but with death," namely, by showing that the soul is immortal.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, in his *Discourse on Method* Descartes hoped by increasing our knowledge of the health and function of the human body, that "we could avoid many infirmities, both of mind and body, and perhaps even the decline of old age."¹⁰⁶ As discussed in Chapter 3, this decline in old age was thought possible through aging retardation.

Leder gathers further support for his thesis by drawing upon Descartes' biographical material, which reveals more of his sentiments on death, aging, and extending the healthy lifespan. Descartes' concern with death was no less of a concern as he grew older. Indeed, physiological changes remind him of his impending death, contributing to his experimental fervency. In a letter to Huygens, Descartes records that

the fact that my hair is turning gray warns me that I should spend all my time trying to set back the process. That is what I am working on

¹⁰² Leder, *Absent Body*.

¹⁰³ Leder, *Absent Body*, 140, from Descartes, *Philosophical Letters*, 163.

¹⁰⁴ Descartes, "Dedication," *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, in *Philosophical Works*, vol. 1, 134.

¹⁰⁵ Leder, *Absent Body*, 139.

¹⁰⁶ Descartes, *Discourse*, 44.

now, and I hope my efforts will succeed even though I lack sufficient experimentation.¹⁰⁷

It is this very anxiety which Barth attributes to the sin of *Sorge*: “In care [*Sorge*] man makes his future his own problem.”¹⁰⁸ Other personal correspondence suggests that Descartes is firmly in the grips of *Sorge*, as evidenced by his increasingly desperate hope of prolonging his life despite the lack of any real progress:

I have never taken such pains to protect my health as now, and whereas I used to think that death might rob me of thirty or forty years at most, it could not now surprise me unless it threatened my hope of living more than a hundred years.¹⁰⁹

Leder concludes that the primary motivation for Descartes’ metaphysical and scientific investigations is the threat of sickness and death. According to Leder, the dualism on display in his *Meditations* whereby the body was treated as a corpse for study, while the soul was immortal, was a therapeutic response to the two-fold threat of sickness and death.¹¹⁰

In proving that the body is a mechanical, mathematical entity, free of all soul attributes, he lays the groundwork for modern scientific medicine. In this way he hopes to discover the ways to indefinitely prolong embodied life. But such a life cannot go on forever. Hence, the necessity of proving the immaterial nature of the rational soul, and thereby its immortality. Body and soul, science and theology. Descartes’s schema serves to combat death on all fronts.¹¹¹

Phenomenologically speaking, it is our own corpse, says Leder, that is always approaching from within yet never arriving, reminding us that we will die. One’s own corpse emerges when illness strikes, when our limbs feel exhausted, or, as in the case of Descartes, when one begins to notice that one’s hair is turning gray. Leder observes that Descartes takes the anticipatory corpse from within, which speaks in first-person language of death, and transfers it to the corpse of the Other in third-person language. Thus, “the terror of the body inaugurated by the approach of the

¹⁰⁷ Jack Rochford Vrooman, *René Descartes: A Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1970), 141 (5 October 1637), quoted in Leder, *Absent Body*, 140.

¹⁰⁸ Barth, *CD IV/2*, 476 [*KD IV/2*, 538].

¹⁰⁹ Vrooman, *René Descartes*, 142 (Letter to Huygens, 4 December 1637), quoted in Leder, *Absent Body*, 197 n. 60.

¹¹⁰ Descartes, *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, in *Philosophical Works*, vol. 1, 151.

¹¹¹ Leder, *Absent Body*, 140-141.

first-person death is countered by the figure of the third-person corpse. For this body yields up all its secrets to the scientist/physician.”¹¹² It is difficult to overstate Descartes’ contribution to the current scientific view of the body. What Leder has attempted to demonstrate however, is that the methodological foundation upon which much of science rests is the fear of death and decay. Moreover, it suggests that the treatment for such fears can be carried out on the body without raising any substantial moral questions. With the mapping of the human genome, the latest casement has swung open revealing attractive vistas of extended youth and delayed decay. It represents the latest ‘turn to the body’ in an effort to combat the *Sorge* resulting from and contributing to the separation of body and soul. The body is no longer connected, so to speak, with the soul. This is especially evident in contemporary anti-aging research, where *Trägheit* is concealed under a flurry of care, or, in the words of Barth, ‘conscientious work.’ Before evaluating current attempts at longevity in light of Christian ascetic practice, it will be useful to consider more closely the specific attitudes towards the aging body within the field of gerontology and evolutionary molecular biology itself.

The Aging Body in Modern Biomedical Project

As Leder has argued, the contemporary biomedical view of the body as a corpse (*Körper*) for material for manipulation (as opposed to the lived body, *Leib*), stem from Descartes’ separation of the body from the soul, a separation motivated by his fear of bodily decay and death. With this move, Gerald McKenny notes that Descartes has initiated a process that brings mortality and disease “into visible presence, and thus under the mastery of the seeing eye and the intervening hand, while also distancing the essential person, the soul, from the body that, despite the power of medicine, is destined to decay.”¹¹³ As such, the functions and operating of the body are described in reductionistic terms, whether at the organ, cellular, or genetic level, as if indeed the body were a functioning corpse. A striking description of the human body comes from within the field of gerontology itself in Dr. Kirkwood’s enormously influential evolutionary theory of aging, called the

¹¹² Leder, *Absent Body*, 148.

¹¹³ McKenny, *To Relieve*, 192.

disposable soma theory. In Chapter 1 it was shown that this assessment comes from the vantage point of our own germ cells which, unlike the somatic cells of which our bodies are largely composed, possess replicative immortality. Thus, Kirkwood posits a new dualism rooted firmly in the material. As germ cells propagate giving rise to human bodies, our very somas are disposable, and somewhat ‘incidental’ to the process. That is, our bodies serve as transport vehicles for the propagation of the essential germ cells. Kirkwood candidly notes that the name of his theory was prompted by comparing the human body “with disposable products like coats, cars, and washing machines.”¹¹⁴ While Kirkwood’s hypothesis carries considerable explanatory weight within the sphere of evolutionary biology, it fails to give an adequate account of embodiment. Moreover, this view of the body does not come without moral implications.

When scientific accounts of the body are presented as the comprehensive story on embodiment loosed from the restrictions of teleological explanations, it is not difficult to see how the *disposable soma* theory leads quite naturally to treating the body as the *soma at our disposal*. In failing to give an adequate (or any) account of what the body is *for*, the body becomes another object for which we have *devised a use*.¹¹⁵ Several have noted this trend. Peter Scott has observed that “our world, including our bodies, is now plastic, to be shaped in our image. Some of us, at least, are *sicut deus*.”¹¹⁶ Through genetic advances the body becomes increasingly subservient to the unencumbered ‘naked will.’

Because of the triumph of the Cartesian view, most of us view the body as a biological substratum whose characteristics are best described in physical and biochemical terms. Fixed with regard to the naked will that stands over against it, the body is nevertheless

¹¹⁴ Kirkwood, *Time*, 68. Robert Arking, “Extending Human Longevity: A Biological Probability,” in *Fountain of Youth*, 183, comments on Kirkwood’s thesis, basically affirming that his explanation for aging is all there is:

And so we age, not because of some philosophically satisfying cosmic reason that requires our senescence and death, but simply because the body’s energy allocations are such that our failure to repair ensures that there is no reason not to age. This biological conclusion may seem dark and despondent to some. Who, after all, wants to believe that his or her death serves no larger purpose at all?

¹¹⁵ O’Donovan, *Resurrection*, 52.

¹¹⁶ Peter Scott, “Nature, Technology, and the Rule of God: (En)countering the Disgracing of Nature,” in *Re-ordering Nature*, 275.

alterable by technology, which promises to bring the body under the dominion of the will.¹¹⁷

Indeed, Descartes' influence on the perception of embodiment can hardly be underemphasized. Given the common premise in contemporary ethical discourse which states that 'since life is good then more life is better,' it appears perfectly reasonable to ask how one might alter one's body to fit this premise, suppressing questions concerning the role of the aging, decaying body in the formation of one's character.

It appears that we are headed towards what Paul Ramsey called a redefinition of our understanding of 'sloth' against the messianic positivism of molecular biology, where righteousness is supplanted by the biological *summum bonum*. Ramsey asserts that "the new form of spiritual sloth will be *not* to want to be bodily perfect and genetically improved."¹¹⁸ In terms of aging research, prolongevity activists have recently coined a new term embodying this sentiment—'gerontologiphobia'—a pejorative term initially ascribed to a respondent in the *New York Times* who said "thanks, but no thanks" in response to prolongevity research.¹¹⁹ The desire to genetically refashion the body for longer durability suggests that the body is being held in contempt, not because the body hinders an ascent to things divine (e.g. Porphyry) or spiritual activity, but because the body all too quickly breaks down and fails to function properly long enough. Since one's projects, desires and longings on this earth threaten to outstrip the longevity of one's body, it is tempting to hold the body in contempt, even as it is asserted that the healthy, functioning body is a crucial prerequisite for autonomy and future flourishing. The very fact that the body is perceived as imposing unnecessary limits on one's desire for more experiences, love interests, and intellectual or artistic quests, and that the body must be genetically redesigned to allow for these expanded possibilities, indicates that the body and soul are in dis-order, and have already 'gone their separate ways.' The most poignant example of this separation is found in the area of aging research which thus far has proven most promising at retarding aging, caloric restriction.

¹¹⁷ McKenny, *To Relieve*, 199.

¹¹⁸ *Fabricated Man*, 145, emphasis mine.

¹¹⁹ Richard A. Miller, "Extending Life: Scientific Prospects and Political Obstacles," in *Fountain of Youth*, 244.

***Trägheit* and Caloric Restriction**

As discussed in Chapter 1, scientists are uncovering the mechanisms of aging by studying the effects of caloric restriction on laboratory animals. Caloric restriction serves as a particularly illuminating example of the ways technology can serve the slothful notion of separating the body from the soul. One such pathway involving the SIR2 gene has been identified in yeast, allowing scientist to replicate the aging retardation process by altering genes without altering eating habits. More recently a similar gene known as SIRT1 has produced reduced aging in mammals, holding more promise that similar genes in humans might be targeted with similar effects.¹²⁰ While there are still disputes between evolutionary and molecular biologists about the promise of such findings, the overall goal suggests that the frenetic search for aging mechanisms is a contemporary form of sloth. We are searching, quite literally, for ways to have our cake and eat it too. The impetus for such technology is clear: genetic alteration is more promising, and the dietary restrictions for longevity required are so repugnant that they severely undermine the desire to live longer in the first place. Olshansky and Carnes acknowledge that “the value of research on caloric restriction is not going to come from encouraging people to restrict their intake of food.”¹²¹ This is instructive, given that researchers estimate that the decrease in caloric intake is not inordinately large. Even so, the general consensus is that “the likelihood that people would willingly commit to a 20% to 30% caloric intake drop is extremely small.”¹²² Rather, suggest Olshansky and Carnes,

future benefits to public health from this area of research will more likely come from identifying the underlying biological mechanisms that are responsible for the effect [of a restricted food intake on the body], rather than encouraging the adoption of diets that almost nobody wants to follow.¹²³

¹²⁰ J. T. Rodgers, et al., “Nutrient Control of Glucose Homeostasis through a Complex of PGC-1 α and SIRT1,” *Nature* 434 (2005): 113-118.

¹²¹ *Quest*, 193.

¹²² Gemma Casadesus, et al., “Eat Less, Eat Better, and Live Longer: Does It Work and Is It Worth It? The Role of Diet in Aging and Disease,” in *Fountain of Youth*, 213.

¹²³ Olshansky, *Quest*, 193.

These insights have spawned a new field of inquiry referred to as ‘caloric restriction mimetics,’ with the recognition that the most attractive scenario for longevity is to engineer a pharmaceutical that triggers the type of gene expression activated by caloric restriction.¹²⁴ The discovery of the genetic mechanisms that may be modulated to slow aging have spawned several companies intent on manufacturing such a pharmaceutical, in hopes of treating disease and ultimately retarding the aging process. Cynthia Kenyon, co-founder of Elixir Pharmaceuticals, has had considerable success in extending the lifespan of the nematode worm. While Elixir is also looking to treat disease by examining the genetic pathways of aging, she acknowledged that her primary goal is retardation of the aging process in order to greatly extend life. Her research with the nematode worm has resulted in a six-fold increase in healthy lifespan. Upon seeing the initial results she exclaimed, “I wanted to be those worms.”¹²⁵ While the worm appears to hold the secret to our salvation, it is difficult to avoid offering a parenthetical remark that Scripture nearly always reserved the worm as a sign of death and decay, as that which feeds upon rotting flesh. Scripture too speaks of a place where the worm does not die (Isaiah 66:24, Mark 9:48). Kenyon notes that “if our company could make a pill, every one would want it.”¹²⁶ Similar efforts with higher order animals like rhesus monkeys are underway with the same goal in mind.¹²⁷ Thus, the hopes of designing such a pill are now routinely considered as the most desirable form of ‘therapy.’¹²⁸

The search for caloric restriction mimetics offers a profound example of the ways in which it is possible to plunge into *Trägheit*, further distancing the body from the soul. Given however that humanity has been created by God as embodied souls and ensouled bodies, any such separation suggests that remaking the body to fit one’s limitless desires forecloses any possibility of utilizing and caring for the body in the

¹²⁴ George S. Roth, “Caloric Restriction and Caloric Restriction Mimetics: Current Status and Promise for the Future,” *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* 53, special supplement (2005): s280-s283.

¹²⁵ Nell Boyce, “In a Hurry to Slow Life’s Clock,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 29 December 2003, 74.

¹²⁶ Boyce, “In a Hurry,” 74.

¹²⁷ Ronald Bailey, “Forever Young,” <http://reason.com/0208/fr.rb.forever.shtml>.

¹²⁸ M. A. Lane, D. K. Ingram, and G. S. Roth, “The Serious Search for an Anti-Aging Pill,” *Scientific American* 287 (2002): 24-29. See also Miller, “Extending Life,” in *Fountain of Youth*, 237; Wade, “A Pill?,” A 20.

reparative process of one's character, a process which in turn has beneficial effects on one's body. The genetic search for the retardation of aging is deficient in that it fails to address the issues of *Trägheit* as a separation of body and soul. Indeed, it only exacerbates the separation. In light of the practice and goals of asceticism discussed in Antony and Athanasius in the previous chapter, it is reasonable to conclude that the genetic search for longevity effectively (1) negates the role of the body in refining one's soul, and (2) fails to recognize that modifying the body to allay fears of death can never effectively mitigate such a fear that dwells in one's soul. These conclusions I discuss in turn.

***Trägheit*: The Loss of the Body's Role in the Refinement of One's Soul**

The life of St. Antony casts current attempts to extend the human lifespan into sharp relief. Certainly there are significant differences between the ascetic and genetic 'remaking' of the body, apart from the more obvious differences of method (e.g. hygienic vs. genetic) and efficacy. As was demonstrated in the last chapter, it could hardly be said that the goal of the ascetic life was a prolonged existence in the body, even though it was thought possible to attain an 'idling' state. Yet, the desert ascetics recognized the moral force of the body that is largely absent within a scientific worldview. No longer is the body implicated in the development of the whole person. As has been shown, the body is at best morally neutral, the *object* of one's desires, rather than a key factor in refining both the body and soul. Where the body was once indispensable in the development of the whole person, the body has now become an object of genetic control in hopes that its deleterious or limiting effects on one's desires might be minimized. For Antony, recognizing the body's limitedness was critical to *both* bodily and spiritual development, a limitedness whose force stemmed from the resurrection body to come. Whereas Athanasius intimated that Antony's longevity was an indirect *result* of his ascetic life, efforts to genetically slow aging perceive longevity as more of a *prerequisite* for a good life. Caloric restriction mimetics merely reinforce our sloth. By such efforts, the body and the soul remain dis-integrated and disordered, as the moral force of the body itself is dissolved, divided into a myriad of genetic pathways which will one day succumb to our technological control. The sentiment that a restriction in food intake will adversely affect the quality of one's life reveals that the body has nothing to say

about the development of one's character, and merely underscores that the body and soul have already gone their separate ways.

This new 'genetic asceticism' is likely to ensure that they remain separated. This is not to say that those who are able to effectively discipline their bodies by restricting their food intake are morally superior, much less that such dietary restrictions necessarily entail a recognition of the moral force of one's body. The very public 'heroic fast' recently carried out by David Blaine who, in neo-Stylite fashion encased himself in a Plexiglas cube forty feet above London is a case in point. It is only to acknowledge that the most common type of fasting which genetic engineering may one day overcome is hygienic fasting where one seeks to reshape one's body through the hard effort of a disciplined diet. Caloric restriction mimetics is so attractive because it offers a potential escape from the type of fasting whereby one limits one's food intake largely for physical purposes—to fit into particular clothes, to enhance one's physique, or to slow down the aging process—a fasting which reveals a problem in one's soul, and represents another form of the naked will over against the body in remaking it to fit one's desires. Caloric restriction mimetics reinforce the assumption adopted by some in Corinth who mistakenly believed that "Food [is] for the stomach and the stomach for food" (1 Corinthians 6:13), a statement Paul countered with the reminder that the body is meant for the Lord, and the Lord for the body (1 Corinthians 6:14). In a similar vein, Paul also reminded those in Rome that both those who eat meat and those who abstain, do so to the Lord (Romans 14:6). Ingesting caloric restriction mimetics for greater longevity will enable us to continue in our sloth, living under the illusion of gained time as those who refuse to be wise rulers of our bodies in service for the Lord, masking over what failed diets ought to reveal about the stubbornness of our own recalcitrant wills and desires—even among those who are justified and sanctified by Christ.

If caloric restriction mimetics promises to eliminate the need for hygienic fasting, no less do they mitigate the practice of fasting for higher purposes. By taking a pill that slows one's aging while simultaneously allowing one to live under the illusion that food is only for the stomach and the stomach only for food, the pathway by which one 'enters the desert' and comes face to face with the haunted regions of one's soul and begins to untwist the tangled web of desires initiated by fasting, is effectively

sealed off. The bodily hunger that reminds us of, and creates within us a deeper hunger for God and his will, the hunger that reminds us that God has food of which the world does not know (John 4:32), that Jesus Christ himself is the bread of life (John 6:35 f), and that fasting from food enables us to feast on God (John 4:34), may one day be mitigated by a pill. The following journal excerpt reveals both the stubbornness of the human will and how very different this type of fasting is from hygienic forms, and hence what might be sacrificed by taking a pill to slow the body down in hopes of enhancing our chance for longevity.

(1) I felt is a great accomplishment to go a whole day without food. Congratulated myself on the fact that I found it so easy . . . (2) Began to see that the above was hardly the goal of fasting. Was helped in this by beginning to feel hunger . . . (3) Began to relate the food fast to other areas of my life where I was more compulsive . . . I did not have to have a seat on the bus to be contented, or to be cool in the summer and warm when it was cold. (4) . . . Reflected more on Christ's suffering and the suffering of those who are hungry and have hungry babies . . . (5) Six months after beginning the fast discipline, I began to see why a two-year period has been suggested. The experience changes along the way. Hunger on fast days became acute, and the temptation to eat stronger. For the first time I was using the day to find God's will for my life. Began to think about what it meant to surrender one's life. (6) I now know that prayer and fasting must be intricately bound together. There is no other way and yet that way is not yet combined in me.¹²⁹

This reveals that the very experience of hunger can serve as a powerful impetus to the refinement of one's will. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted, "fasting helps to discipline the self-indulgent and slothful will which is so reluctant to serve the Lord, and it helps to humiliate and chasten the flesh."¹³⁰

One might suggest that taking a caloric restriction mimetic that bypasses the need for hygienic fasting need not preclude one from embarking on fasting for the spiritual purposes of refining one's will. Indeed, one must grant this possibility, though it seems highly unlikely. For in this particular scenario there comes an increased threat to one's character in that the wisdom gained by reflecting on one's limited time on

¹²⁹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, revised edition (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 72-73, citing Elizabeth O'Connor, *Search for Silence* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1971), 103-104.

¹³⁰ *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth, First Touchstone Edition (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1995), 169.

earth—a reflection in which one is aided by the reminder of one’s very aging and disintegrating body—appears diminished. As will be shown shortly, this was an integral part of Antony’s asceticism. Barth too understood that a recognition of one’s bodily limits was integral to the Christian’s sanctification and the carrying of one’s cross. He speaks of the cross which the Christian must bear in sanctification, where one affirms and loves life as a gift from God and rightly tries to “ward off pain and death,”¹³¹ yet is also able to say ‘Yes’ to pain, suffering and death,

because his sanctification in fellowship with Jesus Christ . . . ultimately includes the fact that he has to see and feel and experience the limit of his existence—even of his Christian existence engaged in sanctification—as the limit of his human and creaturely life, which leads necessarily to death, and proclaiming it, and finally involving it.¹³²

The Christian is not to seek or induce death, says Barth, but rather affirm life as he approaches this frontier. The Christian will affirm both life and death for Jesus’ sake. “He will accept the fact that this limit or frontier is set, and that he has to note it. He will take up his cross.”¹³³ For Barth, our cross includes natural death and the sickness and aging that accompany it, not according to the laws of nature, but based on our fellowship with Christ, who “endured that that limit should be set for Him in the negation of His life.”¹³⁴ By Christ’s resurrection and defeat of death, the Christian need only fear the Lord. Thus, again it reveals that the process of sanctification is jeopardized to the extent that the Christian fails to recognize his own creaturely limitedness, which is ultimately affirmed by Jesus’ limitedness.

An understanding of what might be learned from the very limitedness of the body becomes increasingly important as advances in molecular and evolutionary biology promise to bring the human body under an increasing level of control, and are recognized as the best means by which a significant extension in the healthy lifespan might be attained. Though it is clear that there is much more to learn about the body through increasing knowledge of its functioning at the molecular, cellular, and

¹³¹ *CD IV/2*, 602.

¹³² *CD IV/2*, 602-603.

¹³³ *CD IV/2*, 603.

¹³⁴ *CD IV/2*, 603, see also 611.

genetic levels, the body has nothing more to teach us. In searching for the genetic and molecular pathways that influence aging and designing pharmaceuticals which activate these processes, some hope to further refine the body, oblivious to the moral force of embodiment and proper understanding the role of the body in shaping and being shaped by one's character.

***Trägheit*: Treating the Body to Cure the Soul**

While Bacon and Athanasius both envisioned a return to prelapsarian paradise, they offered two very different methodologies. Bacon sought bodily incorruptibility through increasing knowledge for the “reinvesting (in great part) of man to the sovereignty and power . . . which he had in his first state of creation.”¹³⁵ Athanasius believed that bodily incorruptibility was the result of a rightly ordered body-soul relationship, something appropriated by the One who defeated death and corruption. What Barth and the Desert Fathers have to say to Descartes and to those presently engaged in the ‘Baconian Project’ of extending human life via the genetic retardation of aging to extend life and postpone death, is that no increase in control over the body, no amount of knowledge gained of its functioning, no amount of attention focused on genetically or pharmacologically remaking the body for greater longevity will resolve the problem of *Sorge* in one's soul. By such attempts science continually reenacts the ‘turn to the body’ by which Adam lost his intimate fellowship with God, resulting in the fear of death and a potentially shortened lifespan. Hence, Bacon and Athanasius offer two different pathways to a longer life.

This is not to reassert the false dichotomy where science and medicine are best left to the care of the body and religion to the care of one's soul. Nor does this mean that the body is irrelevant, or that the solution to death lies in a Stoic acceptance to the brute fact of its existence; it is to say quite the opposite. Rather, the fear and anxiety of our finite span cannot be adequately dealt with apart from acknowledging the very *limitedness* of our bodies. For Antony and the eremitic ascetics, remaking the body was subsumed under the larger goal of transforming one's character, involving an explicit *recognition* of bodily limits—even as such practices slowed the body down.

¹³⁵ Bacon, *Valerius Terminus*, in *Philosophical Works*, 188.

On the other hand, those seeking to genetically remake the body are hoping to *transcend* these very bodily limits which are beneficial for instructing one's soul. That the declining and disintegrating body is perceived as a threat reveals that one's body and soul are in a sense, dis-integrated. But if indeed care both results from and contributes to the separation of body and soul, it has been shown that the resolution of this anxiety only occurs through practices which involve a re-integration of body and soul, practices which begin by allowing the body to "become the discreet mentor of the proud soul."¹³⁶ The Desert Fathers remind us that the process of refining one's will and desires *cannot* occur without first attending to the body by limiting, to some degree, its everyday needs. This suggests that the extent to which science discovers how to genetically remake the body for more efficient metabolism, heightened durability and greater longevity, is the extent to which science undermines the body's role in mentoring the soul. If, in the desert ascetics, the body was heavily invested in the transformation of the soul—even as the body itself was 'remade,' thereby enhancing one's possibility of longevity—there is little evidence to suggest that body today under the Cartesian gaze carries any such weight. Given that the dissatisfaction with one's temporal span stems not simply from one's decaying and disintegrating body, but also reflects a disorder of one's soul, I suggest that pursuing practices that reorder the body and soul are the means by which to mitigate such a fear, the very means advocated by Athanasius and employed by Antony.

Asceticism and Its Role in Countering Sorge and Trägheit

Insofar as *Trägheit*—understood as anxiety over one's limited existence (*Sorge*) which both contributes to, and results from, a separation of body and soul—is also characterized as a lack of discipline (*Disziplinlosigkeit*), it is reasonable to conclude that there are ascetic practices informed by a Christian narrative which help reintegrate and reorder the body and soul, allaying the fear and anxiety (*Sorge*) borne out by their separation. This goal of this reordering as understood by Athanasius and Antony was that the body might become subservient to one's Word-guided soul, so that the whole person—ensouled body and embodied soul—might become a 'medium of incarnate expression.' The real man Jesus reflects this perfect ordering,

¹³⁶ Brown, *Body and Society*, 237.

who lived his life in perfect obedience to God as an embodied soul perfectly ruling his ensouled body. Thus, a form of Christian asceticism which minimally involves fasting, meditation, and prayer, offer the means by which the dis-integration and disorder of body and soul are reintegrated and reordered, thereby mitigating the fear of death and one's limited lifespan that have resulted from the sloth of allowing the body and soul to go their separate ways.

It was Athanasius who earlier argued that the death and resurrection of Christ enabled the Christian to defeat the fear of death, the very fear which originated in Adam's 'turn towards the body.'¹³⁷ With Christ's defeat of death through his crucifixion and resurrection however, our own death is no longer something which inspires fear. Though man is by nature afraid of death and the disintegration of the body, says Athanasius, "there is this most startling fact, that he who has put on the faith of the Cross despises even what is naturally fearful, and for Christ's sake is not afraid of death."¹³⁸ The evidence that this is already the case, says Athanasius, is born out by those Christian martyrs who willingly face death for the sake of Christ.¹³⁹ Thus, people of all sorts—men, women, and those "tender in years"—display their readiness to die. These show their contempt for death, and "exercise themselves by bodily discipline against it."¹⁴⁰ Yet, this does not happen automatically. "We fast meditating on death, that we may be able to live," says Athanasius, "hastening to announce the sign of victory over death."¹⁴¹ Hence, a connection exists between discipline with the despisal of death as evidenced by the early Christian martyrs. Brakke observes that

thanks to the Word's victory on the cross, the monk's consideration of death can increase his moral effort instead of making him fearful and morally disordered. . . . the monk can replace the disorienting fear of

¹³⁷ Recently, Ellen T. Charry has addressed this in *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), particularly Chapter 4, "Defeating the Fear of Death: Athanasius of Alexandria."

¹³⁸ *Incarnation* 28.2, 51. See also *Incarnation* 27.1, 50; *Incarnation* 28.4-6, 51.

¹³⁹ *Incarnation* 27.3-4, 51; Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 97.

¹⁴⁰ *Incarnation* 27.3, 51.

¹⁴¹ Athanasius, Letter V.4, in *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, 519.

death with an attitude toward death that results in moral courage and an intensified life of virtue.¹⁴²

Athanasius recognized that Christ had already defeated death by succumbing to it, removing its sting for us. Pettersen too notes that Athanasius “recognizes a close connection between the Christian’s everyday spiritual exercises and his death in Christ.”¹⁴³ As might be expected, Athanasius expresses this point most forcefully in the *Life of Antony*.

Though Antony served as Athanasius’ prime example of the Christian whose discipline enabled him to put on that bodily incorruptibility secured by Christ, the very *brevity* of life served as a motivating factor as he daily “increased in his discipline,” a brevity further punctuated by the promise of eternity. As briefly noted in the last chapter, Athanasius notes that Antony spent much time in his cell fixing his desires on heaven and continually “pondering over the shortness of man’s life.”¹⁴⁴ Antony knew that a better embodiment awaited him after death, an embodiment that offered more than simply freedom from decay, but an embodiment where the struggle with sin was no longer possible. Hence, he advocated reflection on the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:31—‘I die daily,’ living “as though under the daily expectation of death,” in order that sin might be avoided, a theme repeated in the *Life of Antony*.¹⁴⁵

We have lived in the discipline a long time: but rather as though making a beginning daily let us increase our earnestness. For the whole life of man is very short, measured by the ages to come, wherefore all our time is nothing compared with eternal life. . . . For it is written, ‘The days of our life in them are threescore years and ten, but if they are in strength, fourscore years, and what is more than these is labour and sorrow.’ [Psalm 90:10] Whenever, therefore, we live full fourscore years, or even a hundred in the discipline, not for a hundred years only shall we reign, but instead of a hundred we shall reign for ever and ever. And though we fought on earth, we shall not receive our inheritance on earth, but we have the promises in heaven;

¹⁴² Athanasius, 223.

¹⁴³ Athanasius, 97.

¹⁴⁴ *Life of Antony* 45, 208. Antony did struggle with the fact that some lived longer than others. The *Apophthegmata Patrum* records that Antony wondered why God allowed some to die young, while others “drag on to extreme old age.” See AP Antony 2, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 2.

¹⁴⁵ *Life* 19, 201. See also *Life* 89, 91, 219, 220 respectively.

and having put off the body which is corrupt, we shall receive it incorrupt.¹⁴⁶

According to Athanasius, asceticism was firmly rooted in the reality that the body decays and eventually dies, for this reflects the good order of God by whom our limited existence is sustained. But it also reflects the victory over death won by Christ, whereby a limited degree of incorruptibility might be regained on this earth, though it pales in comparison to the absolute bodily incorruptibility to be received in the resurrection. This realization of the limited and troubled nature of bodily existence was heightened by reflecting on the fact that one day the incorruptible body will put on incorruptibility on account of the One who took on a corruptible body, surrendered to death, and rose from the dead thereby defeating it. Under such considerations, the length of one's own life is subsumed under the desire to do God's will and answer his call. So too, Barth, reflecting on Christian practice, recognized the benefit of a *meditatio futurae vitae*, where one's absolute will for life "may perhaps in many ways be weakened, broken, relativised and finally destroyed."¹⁴⁷ While the Desert Fathers did not consider the desire for long life as necessarily bad, the fear of long life marked by a slow bodily decline and dependence on others was credited to avarice. According to Evagrius Ponticus, "avarice suggests to the mind a lengthy old age, inability to perform manual labor (at some future date), famines that are sure to come, sickness that will visit us, the pinch of poverty, the great shame that comes from accepting the necessities of life from others."¹⁴⁸ It is precisely this scenario of prolonged senescence—a "lengthy old age" where one must accept "the necessities of life from others"—that the many gerontologists and geneticists hope to overcome.

Antony believed that a daily reflection that each particular day may be one's last helps one avoid sin and live properly. In the previous chapter it was shown that such a mindset enabled Antony to willingly face the possibility of martyrdom when he visited those Christians condemned to death in Alexandria. Brakke has astutely noted

¹⁴⁶ *Life* 16, 200.

¹⁴⁷ *CD* III/4, 342.

¹⁴⁸ *Praktikos* 9, in *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 17.

that for Antony “the soul’s anxiety about death lies at the root of the human inability to lead a virtuous life,” as evident in the numerous horrific demonic appearances (*Life of Antony* 9, 23, 24, 28, 30, 32) designed to instill fear in young Antony and to dissuade him from following the life of virtue.¹⁴⁹ For to lead a life of virtue meant bearing one’s cross. To bear the cross of Christ in the Christian life meant to be open to suffering, and to be free from fear of death. Antony did not hesitate to stress this point to the philosophers who visited him in his cave. “But concerning the Cross, which would you say to be the better, to bear it, when a plot is brought about by wicked men, nor [*sic*] to be in fear of death brought about under any form whatever?”¹⁵⁰ Antony knew that the extent to which the Christian fears her own death is the extent to which she is unable to take up her cross and follow Christ (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Douglas Burton-Christie asserts that the Desert Fathers practiced discipline to mitigate care and attain the freedom that enabled one to serve others, issues which were so critical for Barth.¹⁵¹ Indeed, while Barth understood that care puts one in bondage where one ‘makes the future his own problem,’ Burton-Christie observes that

the *telos* of the monks’ life in the desert was freedom: freedom from anxiety about the future; freedom from the tyranny of haunting memories of the past; freedom from an attachment to the ego which precluded intimacy with others and with God. They hoped also that this freedom would express itself in a positive sense: freedom to love others; freedom to enjoy the presence of God; freedom to live in the innocence of a new paradise.¹⁵²

The supposed ‘freedom’ to be found in genetically manipulating the aging process to ensure more opportunities for future flourishing is quite different from the true freedom which comes from surrendering one’s self, soul and body, to the One who surrendered Himself up to death in the sure hope of a future intimate fellowship with

¹⁴⁹ Brakke, *Athanasius*, 222; see 118-223.

¹⁵⁰ Athanasius, *Life* 75, 216; *Incarnation* 24.3, 49.

¹⁵¹ Recall that the second form of *Trägheit* was characterized as man’s inhumanity whereby his relationship to his fellow creatures is damaged, Barth, *CD* IV/2, 409 f.

¹⁵² Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 222. The heading of the section from which this quote was taken is entitled “Freedom From Care.”

him in resurrected bodies incapable of decay. The fear engendered by the decaying body and hence the decaying self (*Sorge*) speaks of dissipation, and that the body and soul are out of order (*Trägheit*). Thus, no amount of genetic manipulation will secure that desired freedom from the fear of decay which comes from reordering the body and soul in recognition of the limitedness of the body, a limitedness confirmed as good and proper by the very man Jesus Christ who, as an embodied soul and ensouled body conquered death that his followers may have new life here and now.

Through the disciplines of prayer and fasting, Antony was able to conquer his fear of death that may have otherwise hindered his service to God. The goal of this process, informed by Scripture and permeated with God's will for one's life, involved restoring the soul as the rightful leader of the body, to be offered in service to God as a 'sacramental body.' When one's soul or will has been transformed by submitting to the body, concern over the length of one's life is somewhat relativized, even as one recognizes that fasting offers the possibility of remaking the body for greater longevity on this earth. Thus, the Christian who first comes under the tutelage of the body will perhaps no longer find the prospect of an extended lifespan as alluring. As mentioned earlier, Paul expressed this relativization in Philippians 1:20-24, where he was anxious to depart and be present with the Lord, recognizing that "to die is gain." Paul could hardly conceive of his lifespan in terms of years, but rather in terms of God's tasks, hopeful in the knowledge that "Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or death."¹⁵³ So too, in his farewell to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:13-24), Paul, speaking as one who knew that only prison and hardship lay ahead, said that "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me."¹⁵⁴ Yet, it is important to be reminded that it is not necessarily wrong to want a longer life, as long life is indeed a good gift to be used in fellowship with and service to God. Moreover, arguing for the practices of fasting as one of the Christian disciplines which enables one to mitigate the fear of death and decay, effectively relativizing the significance of one's lifespan—even as it enhances the body and the possibility of living longer—by no means precludes the use of medicine to treat and cure diseases which would

¹⁵³ Philippians 1:20, NIV.

¹⁵⁴ Acts 20:24, NIV.

otherwise cut one's life short.¹⁵⁵ Jesus did indeed extend the lives of those he healed and brought back from the dead (Luke 7: 1-10, 11-17; 8:41-42, 49-56, John 4:46-53; 11:1-44), as did Peter (Acts 9:36-41), though none ultimately escaped aging and death.

Equally important is a recognition that it is possible to have one's life extended by the successful treatment or cure of an illness or disease, and yet desire such things for the wrong reason—out of a fear of decay, decline, and potential the loss of autonomy, because one has things left to accomplish—reasons which reveal that one is still in the grips of *Trägheit*, where life itself is one's ethical lord.¹⁵⁶ By God's grace healing is made possible through the use of medicine and technology, even though extra time allotted might very well be put to selfish ends. Yet, that nine of the ten lepers healed by Jesus did not return to give him thanks did not prevent Jesus from healing all ten (Luke 17:12-18). It is equally important to recognize that bodily decay and illness can serve as moral projects. McKenny notes that the suffering that occurs from the decay of one's own body can be used "for meditation on sin and the need for grace, and many of the disciplines . . ."¹⁵⁷ At least some of the desert ascetics recognized this. While acknowledging that it is good to only discipline one's *healthy* body, Barsanuphius of Gaza (d. 540 CE) asserted that "illness is greater than discipline, and is reckoned as a substitute for ascetic behavior."¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, though it is possible to use medicine in curing the body from various illnesses resulting in an extended life, it may actually 'distance' the body from the soul. Physical healing of one's body may in fact have a detrimental effect on one's soul or character. One must remember how Hezekiah used his extended life unwisely, expressing relief that the punishment would be visited on his progeny. "Will there not be peace and security in my lifetime?"¹⁵⁹ How different is Hezekiah's response

¹⁵⁵ The methods utilized of course need to be scrutinized by a Christian understanding of the human in light of the creation, fall, and reconciliation enacted by Jesus Christ, particularly research dealing with human embryos, cloning, and the possibilities of somatic and germ cell therapies.

¹⁵⁶ Barth, *CD* III/4, 326.

¹⁵⁷ McKenny, *To Relieve*, 221.

¹⁵⁸ Barsanuphius, "Letter 78," *Letters From the Desert*, 80. We also find an acknowledgement that the ascetic rule concerning fasting is essentially useless when the body is unwell, "Letter 23," *Letters From the Desert*, 66.

¹⁵⁹ 2 Kings 20:19b, NIV.

from the Psalmist's: "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come."¹⁶⁰

Hezekiah's life illustrates both the grace of God and just how dangerous some forms of knowledge can be. While science will never be able to assure one's length of life with absolute certainty, living as though this were a guarantee is to live as a fool.

To say however that fasting is an alternative to genetic manipulation for greater longevity is to overlook that fasting was subsumed under the larger moral project of sanctification, yet crucially integral to this process. It is more accurate to say that the Christian who integrates the discipline of fasting into her life as an aid to prayer and the *meditatio scripturarum* in the transformation of one's character may indeed slow down the aging of her body, resulting in a *potentially* longer, healthier life. But for the person who has been transformed by submitting the soul and the body to the Lord, the length of life takes on less importance. Certainly, while fasting as a Christian discipline is widely ignored today, Scripture bears witness to the significance of fasting for the Israelites as God's people—in various forms and for various reasons—a significance that is in no way marginalized in the New Testament.¹⁶¹ Jesus himself advocated the discipline of fasting. Though he refrained from issuing a command regarding fasting, he spoke with the presupposition that fasting was an integral part of being a disciple of Christ (Matthew 6:16; **Qtan del nhsteuhte . . .**), and would continue to be so, especially upon his ascension (Matthew 9:15). In Antony fasting is taken to an extreme. Yet, contrary to Athanasius' presentation of Antony as a model for all to follow, the ascetic life neither demanded a virtuoso performance of heroic proportions, nor did it require a flight to the desert in search of an extended solitude. Indeed, these Christian practices in the struggle to holiness are not to be carried out in isolation, and are deficient if separated from the community of faith. A brief examination of Athanasius' *Festal Letters* is useful in this regard.

¹⁶⁰ Psalm 71:18, NIV.

¹⁶¹ Within Scripture there are various prescribed modes of fasting, from complete abstinence (Esther 4:16, Acts 9:9) to avoiding certain kinds of food (Daniel 1:12-15, 10:3). Moreover, there were several reasons for fasting, including the corporate fast on the day of atonement (Leviticus 23:27), and national emergencies (2 Chronicles 20:1-4, Esther 4:16, Joel 2:15).

Fasting and the Body of Christ

What life have you if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
And no community not lived in praise of GOD.
Even the anchorite who meditates alone,
For whom the days and nights repeat the praise of GOD,
Prays for the Church, the Body of Christ incarnate.¹⁶²

Athanasius' *Festal Letters* are replete with exhortations indicating that prayer and fasting were to be a normal part of every Christian's life, to be practiced with increased vigor during particular times of the year, especially during the forty days preceding the Easter feast.¹⁶³ Writing to the churches in his episcopate he says, "behold, my brethren, how much a fast can do, and in what manner the law commands us to fast."¹⁶⁴ Athanasius urges that during Lent Christians ought to "increase the discipline [**ajskhsi**]" all the more," practices which include prayers and vigils, temporary renunciation of sexual relations, fasting, studying the Scriptures, restoring fractured relationships, and providing for the poor.¹⁶⁵ Brakke rightly concludes that Athanasius' promulgation of the ascetic lifestyle did not exempt 'ordinary' Christians from participation, though advanced ascetic practice was not mandatory. Rather, the difference between the ordinary and advanced Christian was one of degree, and not fundamentally different in character.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, other early church documents made it clear that fasting was important for all believers, implicitly denying that fasting is for those who are advanced in the Christian life. The *Didache* described fasting as integral to the pathway of life (in distinction from the way of death), a way marked by loving one's enemies and fasting for the sake of persecutors (**nhsteuete delupeŕ twa diwkontwn uma**"), an apparent rewording of Jesus' commandment in Matthew 5:44 (**kailproseuchsqe upeŕ twa diwkontwn**

¹⁶² T. S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1963), 168.

¹⁶³ Athanasius, Letter VI. 11-12, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, 522-523, Letter XIX. 8-9, 547-548.

¹⁶⁴ Athanasius, Letter I.5, in *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, 508.

¹⁶⁵ Brakke, *Athanasius*, 183.

¹⁶⁶ Brakke, *Athanasius*, 181. Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 96, has observed that in Plotinus and Antony we have a parting of the ways by which one gains mastery over one's body. While disciples of the former were intellectually groomed in literature and philosophy, those of the latter could simply open the Scriptures and take the command of Christ literally, as did Antony, which led to his flight to the desert.

uma").¹⁶⁷ The *Didache* thus goes beyond Scripture in elevating fasting to a command, calling for fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays in distinction from the Pharisees, who fasted on Mondays and Thursdays.¹⁶⁸ If the teachings of the early church did not limit fasting to the few spiritual elite, much less was there a requirement to take up a life of complete solitude.

Particularly insightful in this regard is Athanasius' letter to the monk Dracontius who turned down his newly elected post as Bishop, wishing instead to remain in the monastery. Athanasius reminded Dracontius that several monks had left the monastery to take up posts in the episcopate. Athanasius' eloquence is on display as he informs Dracontius that his new position as Bishop would by no means preclude a cessation of his ascetic life—"for we know both bishops who fast and monks who drink"—but would actually serve to strengthen the community of believers:

For it is possible for you also as a bishop to hunger and thirst as Paul did. You can drink no wine, like Timothy, and fast constantly too like Paul, in order that thus fasting after his example you may feast others with your words, and while thirsting for lack of drink, water others by teaching.¹⁶⁹

Pettersen concludes that for Athanasius "it is most noteworthy that practicing the higher form of Christian life is not limited to those who withdraw from society; it may be embraced within society."¹⁷⁰ Recent scholarship from various quarters has revealed that the lines between the city and the desert, between isolation and living in a community, between those advanced in the ascetic life and those less so, are significantly blurred.¹⁷¹ Though the average Christian in Alexandria was expected to

¹⁶⁷ *The Didache* III.3, in *The Oldest Church Manual Called the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, the Didache and Kindred Documents in the Original*, ed. and trans. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1885), 164.

¹⁶⁸ *The Didache* VIII.1, in *Oldest Church Manual*, 187-188.

¹⁶⁹ Athanasius, *Ad Dracontium* 9, *NPNF* Second Series, vol. 4, 560.

¹⁷⁰ Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 100, referring to Athanasius' letters *De Fuga* and *Ad Dracontium*.

¹⁷¹ Concerning the anachronistic distinction between anchoritic and coenobitic monasticism, see Goehring, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert*, chs. 1-3. On page 21 he asserts that the ascetic life—whether practiced alone or with like-minded individuals—constitutes a withdrawal from certain social patterns of life, and need not entail a physical separation from the community. See also Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971-1997," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 353-376, where he amends his earlier article, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80-101. Brown admits that his concept of the holy man was incorrect in that he had to be different than everyone else, and that his holy man was essentially 'flattened' by emphasizing the holy man's 'translocation' over his 'transformation.'

fast as part of the Christian life, none were required to live the life of a hermit. Indeed, the *Life of Antony* itself attests to the presence of ‘village hermit,’ in an adjacent village who had an influence on Antony early in his life.¹⁷² The *Life of Antony* also records how Antony served and ministered to others who sought him out, effectively colonizing the desert with monks, a point recognized by Derwas Chitty whose borrowed phrase from the *Life of Antony* became the title of his own seminal work, *The Desert a City*.¹⁷³ Brakke too has observed that the benefits of this body-soul reordering extend to the community of believers: “He [Antony] subjects his body to his Word-guided soul and thereby becomes the conduit for the Word’s bodily benefits to others.”¹⁷⁴ Antony too seemed to recognize this. In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, he is recorded as saying that “our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ.”¹⁷⁵

Thus, while Athanasius holds out Anthony as the exemplary ascetic, he allows and even encourages ascetic practices—fasting in particular—for *all* Christians as part of their lives without demanding the drastic measures undertaken by Antony. There is a sense then in which all Christians are to be practicing ascetics. Paul Ramsey has alluded to the ascetic nature of the Christian life with respect to fasting, which might just as well be a summary Athanasius’ description of the Christian life. In contrasting the purpose of Christian fasting from that of Aristotle, he observes that

through infused temperance, however, a Christian moderates his bodily appetites, . . . for the sake of his unqualifiedly enthusiastic love for God. To the degree that the human soul is loyally subject to God and perfectly obedient, a proportionately greater emphasis will, as a consequence, be placed upon subjecting the body to the soul. Thus, by infusion of moral virtue, a Christian is shifted slightly to the ascetic extreme, though he still engages in the moderate satisfaction of desire.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Athanasius, *Life* 3, 196.

¹⁷³ See *Life of Antony* 14, 200.

¹⁷⁴ Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 244

¹⁷⁵ AP Antony 9, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 3.

¹⁷⁶ Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1950), 228.

However, the other aspect of fasting most evident in Athanasius' *Festal Letters* is the corporate aspect; Athanasius' exhortations to fasting and prayer during Lent and other times of the year are undeniably communal in character. Before addressing this element however, it would be wise to acknowledge that there are certainly dangers in pursuing the discipline of fasting.

The Dangers of Fasting

While fasting was a discipline thoroughly inscribed within the larger moral project of the transformation of one's soul, it will be useful to remember John Howard Yoder's "positive doctrine of human fallibility."¹⁷⁷ The apostle Paul testifies to this 'positive doctrine' when he admits that he does the very things he hates, despite 'knowing better' (Romans 7:15). Indeed, it is clear that fasting can stem from numerous, and often conflicting motives, including an inadequate or disparaging view of one's body. Intentions and motives are rarely, if ever, singular in nature and notoriously difficult to discern.¹⁷⁸ For instance, to question the extent to which fasting may have impacted one's longevity suggests ulterior motives may be at work, even as fasting may be simultaneously undertaken out of a desire to feast on God. Moreover, the undertaking any physiological regimen out of improper motives—through fasting and/or bodily exercise—can, in turn, have an adverse affect on one's character.

Carl Elliott, for instance, discusses Sam Fussell's autobiographical account of his transformation from a skinny, pale, timid, bookish reserved intellectual to an enormous, bulging, steroid-enhanced world-class body builder.¹⁷⁹ Having recently moved to New York City, Fussell found himself so afraid of being assaulted that the continual stress made him physically ill. An avid reader, Fussell stumbled across a

¹⁷⁷ *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 5.

¹⁷⁸ See the insightful discussion by Ian C. M. Fairweather and James I. H. McDonald, *The Quest for Christian Ethics: An Inquiry into Ethics and Christian Ethics* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1984), on the distinction between motives, dispositions, and reasons, 65-71.

¹⁷⁹ Carl Elliott, *Better than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company), 35 ff, commenting on Samuel W. Fussell, *Muscle: Confessions of an Unlikely Body Builder* (New York: Avon Books, 1991). Elliot's interest in Fussell's account concerns the language Fussell employs in describing his own self-transformation, which ranges from becoming his authentic self to bodybuilding as self-invention.

biography of the world-class bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger, and shortly thereafter took up weightlifting routine which quickly developed into an obsessive regime, described as a “perpetual cycle of eating, dieting, and working out, buying seventy eggs a week and pumping his body to overflowing with enhancement drugs.”¹⁸⁰ The gradual changes in Fussell’s personality mirrored the changes in his body. The formerly soft-spoken and diffident Fussell who once answered the phone in a polite “hello?” now barked “SPEAK!” at the first ring. “Thank you” was stricken from his vocabulary in favor of “no kindness forgotten, no transgression forgiven.”¹⁸¹ Lost in Fussell’s focus on physiological transformation, however, was the driving force of fear. Only much later would Fussell candidly say, “without being fully aware of it myself, I became the kind of man I once feared and despised. I became, in fact, a bully.”¹⁸² This account illustrates how both how difficult motives can be to discern, and how physiological regimes driven in part by motives which are not entirely unwarranted (e.g. fear) can be mutually reinforcing, and harmful to one’s body *and* one’s soul.

If Fussell’s example illustrates the dangers associated with enhancing one’s appearance through a harsh physical regime driven by fear or lack of control, fasting is no less susceptible to similar abuse. If anchorites and monks could engage in fasting and self-flagellation out of a misguided hatred for the body, it seems more likely today that fasting can stem from of mild dissatisfaction over the condition one’s body in order to ‘take off a few extra pounds.’ In the United States there are numerous self-improvement ‘reality’ television programs dedicated to such concerns. One of the most recent programs, “I Want to Look Like a High School Cheerleader Again,” chronicles the intense work out routines of ten overweight women seeking to regain the physique they once enjoyed as high schoolers, with the unquestioned assumption that the ideal body type is that of an indefatigably nubile seventeen-year-old girl. Dissatisfaction with one’s body is a trend that is increasing among both the young and old—girls and women, boys and men. Ellen Driscoll notes that we (girls and women in particular) are learning too well to be uncomfortable with our

¹⁸⁰ Elliott, *Better than Well*, 37.

¹⁸¹ Fussell, *Muscle*, 69-70.

¹⁸² Fussell, *Muscle*, 68.

untransformed bodies, uncritically adopting “the rhetoric of fitness [which] requires that we be unremittingly vigilant and penitent in liberating our bodies from fat and from the shame of our histories.”¹⁸³

Particularly interesting is the research conducted by Joan Jacobs Brumberg, who has observed a gradual shift in American adolescent girls’ perceptions of their own bodies over the last century by investigating their diaries.¹⁸⁴ She notes that the language and locus of self-improvement has shifted from one’s *character* to one’s *body*. A girl in 1892 resolved “to think before speaking. To work seriously. . . to be dignified. Interest myself more in others,”¹⁸⁵ while a 1982 adolescent promised to make herself better in any way she possibly could. “I will lose weight, get new lenses, already got a new haircut, good makeup, new clothes and accessories.”¹⁸⁶ Yet, *both* are moral projects. Indeed, it has been suggested that becoming thin is the new religion of our culture. “Slimming has become the national religion in America, and slenderness the measure of one’s moral caliber.”¹⁸⁷

While fasting among girls and women has been described as “the violence of narcissism,”¹⁸⁸ the causes of fasting are complex and the influences numerous.¹⁸⁹ There is certainly a more pernicious form of extreme fasting among girls and women today closely related to the disorders of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, which are largely understood as ways of using food by starving oneself to mitigate tension,

¹⁸³ Driscoll, “Hunger,” 96.

¹⁸⁴ *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997). See also *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (Newbury Park, CA: Vintage Press, 2000); Hilde Bruch, *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa*, First Harvard University Press Paperback Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹⁸⁵ Blomberg, *Body Project*, xxi.

¹⁸⁶ Blomberg, *Body Project*, xxi.

¹⁸⁷ Ellmann, *Hunger Artists*, 5.

¹⁸⁸ Driscoll, “Hunger,” 93.

¹⁸⁹ Maud Ellmann notes however that ‘fasting’ can also be imposed for numerous reasons, from war, making a political statement, famine, psychosis, to disease, dieting, or piety, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4-5. See also Driscoll, “Hunger,” 104.

anger, and anxiety and gain a sense of control.¹⁹⁰ Several have noted similar behavioral patterns between these eating disorders and the fasting regimens valorized in Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), and other medieval mystics.¹⁹¹ In her work *Holy Fast and Holy Feast*, Caroline Walker Bynum has noted the complex relationship between food and spirituality for medieval women mystics.¹⁹² These women often fasted to near starvation throughout the week so that they might literally enjoy a mystical union *with* Christ by feasting *on* Christ in the Eucharist—a feature largely absent among the holy men who fasted.¹⁹³ Bynum asserts that eating the Eucharist was to become God, and to become that body of Christ which was rent, torn, and dying, and thus “to lift one’s own physicality into suffering and into glory.”¹⁹⁴ By eating only the Eucharist, these women also acquired the discipline to refrain from food the rest of the week. To fast was to discipline the body and keep it from gluttony and lust and to gain freedom from the curse of Eve, as evidenced by the suspension of the menstrual cycle.¹⁹⁵ Bynum’s research suggests that twenty-three percent of those women canonized as saints between 1000 and

¹⁹⁰ J. P. Feighner’s criteria for these disorders are numerous, including onset before the age of twenty-five, a lack of appetite accompanied by at least a 25% loss in original body weight, an implacable attitude toward eating which may include enjoyment in losing weight with overt manifestations that refusing food is very pleasurable, and no known physical illnesses or psychiatric disorders. For a fuller description, see Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 2-3. This eating disorder was first described as physiological in 1684 by English physician Richard Morton, and later identified as a psychosomatic disorder by William W. Gull and E. C. Lasègue in 1873. See Richard Morton, *Phthisiologia seu exercitationem de phthisi* (Ulm, Germany: David Bartholomae, 1714); “Apepsia Hysterica, Anorexia Nervosa,” *Transactions of the Clinical Society* 7 (1874): 22-24; E. Charles Lasègue, “De l’anorexie hystérique,” *Archives générales de médecine* 21 (1873): 385-403. The term bulimia was first used by M. Boskind-Lodhal and Gerald Russell working in the Royal Free Hospital in London in 1977. The term essentially means “ravenous hunger,” and derives from a conflation of two Greek words: **βου-**, “ox,” and **ἰμορ**, “hunger.” The term was first published in G. F. M. Russell, “Bulimia Nervosa: An Ominous Variant of Anorexia Nervosa,” *Psychological Medicine* 9 (1979): 429-448. See also “Thoughts on the 25th Anniversary of Bulimia Nervosa,” *European Eating Disorders Review* 12 (2004): 139-152.

¹⁹¹ See Martha J. Reineke, “This is My Body: Reflections on Abjection, Anorexia, and Medieval Women Mystics,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (Summer 1990): 245-265; Walter Vandereycken, and Ron Van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: A History of Self-Starvation* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Mary Michelle Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimensions of Eating Problems among American Girls and Women*, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Bell, *Holy Anorexia*.

¹⁹² *Holy Fast and Holy Feast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

¹⁹³ *Holy Fast*, 93, 105-106.

¹⁹⁴ *Holy Fast*, 251.

¹⁹⁵ “Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women,” *Representations* 11 (1985): 11.

1700 died from asceticism, while fifty-three percent considered illness as central to their sanctity.¹⁹⁶

Others have identified clear parallels between these mystic saints and contemporary anorectics. Gail Corrington, for instance, sees historical and psychological continuities between anorectic women and the mystic saints in that both view fasting as a form of self-control, including the search for identity and autonomy.¹⁹⁷ The following statement from the diary of an anorectic woman, Gertrude, reveals an ascetic dimension to her disorder.

I thought . . . that I was molding myself into that wonderful ascetic pure image . . . I felt that I had to do something I didn't want for a higher purpose . . . I created a new image for myself and disciplined myself to a new way of life.¹⁹⁸

Like Teresa of Avila who equated fasting with freedom and likened eating to the 'killing of the soul,'¹⁹⁹ so too Gertrude views food as detrimental to that "wonderful ascetic pure image." Ellen Driscoll too has observed that

the macerations of the anorectic, the weigh-ins of the "weight-watcher," and the austerities of a Saint Catherine—all begin with . . . "the dream of a miraculous transfiguration, whereby the immolation of the flesh will be rewarded by its resurrection," be that in the body of a model or of an angel (the two being indistinguishable in most representations, I might add).²⁰⁰

While there are commonalities between anorectic fasting and 'holy fasting,' the causes and influences in both eras are exceedingly complex. While Rudolph Bell rightly asserts that "whether anorexia is holy or nervous depends on the culture in

¹⁹⁶ *Holy Fast*, 76.

¹⁹⁷ Gail Corrington, "Anorexia, Asceticism, and Autonomy: Self-Control as Liberation and Transcendence," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (Fall 1986): 51-61. See also Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, 17.

¹⁹⁸ Gertrude, in Hilde Bruch, *Eating Disorders* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 16-17, quoted in Corrington, "Anorexia, Asceticism, and Autonomy," 51.

¹⁹⁹ "This soul would fain see itself free and eating is killing it," *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, trans. and ed. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Image, 1960), 165.

²⁰⁰ Driscoll, "Hunger," 99, quoting Ellmann, *Hunger Artists*, 14.

which a young woman strives to gain control of her life,”²⁰¹ Caroline Bynum is also right to note that there is a clear distinction between choosing to renounce food and an inability to eat, and hence right to warn against identifying these phenomena as identical, given the theological meaning in one epoch and the more psychiatric, clinical pathological meaning today. In both cases such behavior “is learned from a culture that has complex and long-standing traditions about women, about bodies, and about food,” including exactly what kind of behaviors are in need of a ‘cure.’²⁰² Thus, that a contemporary label like anorexia nervosa might be applied to earlier fasting practices is not terribly helpful. Nevertheless, it would seem that fasting as a spiritual discipline is open to the possibility of abuse—especially among girls—which may contribute, in some way, to the development of behaviors common to anorexia nervosa and bulimia, given again that motives are frequently numerous, and difficult to fully discern. Moreover, for those already struggling with an eating disorder, it may very well be that *eating well* becomes a form of spiritual discipline, where one learns to give up some element of control in learning to affirm one’s body as God’s temple (1 Corinthians 3:16).²⁰³ Given then the difficulty in discerning the motives of fasting and the potential abuses to which fasting may be put, it must be said that fasting is not a discipline that all Christians must follow, at least to the degree or regularity of the Desert Fathers or medieval spiritual mystics. Moreover, situating the discipline of fasting within the practices of the community of faith may also guard against the aforementioned abuses, a topic to which I now turn.

Fasting and the Body of Christ: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper

Athanasius’ *Festal Letters* reveal that fasting and feasting were shared disciplines within the larger life of the church body. In her work *Holy Fast and Holy Feast*, Caroline Walker Bynum asserts that the most important food practices for the early Christians were fasting and the Eucharist.²⁰⁴ With the development of organized

²⁰¹ *Holy Anorexia*, 20.

²⁰² Bynum, *Holy Fast*, 198. See also Reineke, “This is My Body,” 254.

²⁰³ After presenting a paper on fasting as a spiritual discipline, a young woman who was being treated for anorexia whether asked me whether she should engage in fasting as a spiritual discipline. My response, however inadequate, was similar to that above.

²⁰⁴ *Holy Fast and Holy Feast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 31, 33, 250.

monasticism, Bynum observes that “the third and fourth centuries thus witnessed the emergence of fasting and abstinence as extensive corporate practices among Christians.”²⁰⁵ She asserts that

we must not forget that fasting was most basically something that brought Christians together—in gratitude for God’s gift of the harvest; in obedience to God’s command of abstinence, violated in the Garden of Eden but fulfilled on the cross; in charity toward the neighbors who would benefit from alms; and in foretaste of union with the saints in heaven.²⁰⁶

Thus, fasting was intimately bound up with others in the body of Christ. To fast was to allow one’s freely forfeited food to be used to serve those in need. Bynum quotes Pope Leo the Great in his call for the December fast in thanks for a bountiful harvest: “Let the abstinence of the faithful become the nourishment of the poor and let the indigent receive that which others give up.”²⁰⁷ By fasting in this manner, “Christ is fed, . . . for what one denied to oneself in fast was given to Christ’s own body, his Church.”²⁰⁸ In most western cultures marked by a superabundance of food, it is as difficult to imagine corporate fasting as it is to imagine that there are others in body of Christ that might benefit from the food one freely forgoes. Thus, fasting need not be continual or solitary, though allowances must be made for those like Anna the prophetess who continually worshiped in the temple, “fasting and praying.”²⁰⁹ This suggests that a life lived in devotion to the Lord whereby one engages in a form of continual fasting may turn out to be a substantially extended life, though such a life may seem unattractive to those wishing to secure a longer life. Thus, any discipline of fasting—even with the recognition that it is possible to remake one’s body by retarding the aging process—should not be disconnected from the practices of the church which connect the Christian with Christ’s crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension; baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

²⁰⁵ Bynum, *Holy Fast*, 38.

²⁰⁶ Bynum, *Holy Fast*, 39.

²⁰⁷ Bynum, *Holy Fast*, 31, quoting Leo the Great, Sermon 20.

²⁰⁸ Bynum, *Holy Fast*, 33-34.

²⁰⁹ Luke 2:37 NIV. It may be no coincidence that Luke records that Anna was ‘very old.’ She was at least eighty-four, and possibly older, as there is ambiguity in the Greek text allowing for the possibility that Anna had been widowed for eighty-four years, which would likely put her age at near one hundred.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

There is evidence that the early church maintained a relationship the discipline of fasting with baptism. In addition to the aforementioned fasts commanded in the *Didache*, was the command for both the catechumens and those baptizing to fast two days prior to baptism.²¹⁰ Baptism reminds the Christian that he is baptized into the death of Jesus Christ, having been buried with him, bringing forth the inevitability of death (Romans 6:3). Perhaps the most forceful imagery is visible in communities engaging in baptism by immersion. For catechumen's submersion under water and temporarily out of sight from witnesses, reminded observers that they too shall one day be lowered out of sight from those standing around their grave. The resurfacing of the catechumen attests equally to Christ's resurrection (Romans 6:5, 8), pointing to his new life in Christ. Baptism reinforces the centrality of the resurrection, the very resurrection towards which Athanasius' exhortations to fast, pointed. Thus, baptism "frees us from the power illness and death threaten to exert over our lives,"²¹¹ a power that might otherwise compel one to separate body and soul in pursuing genetic solutions to the problem of aging.

If baptism reminds us of Christ's death and resurrection, the Lord's Supper or Eucharist focuses more specifically on Christ's sacrifice, though it too has an eschatological component. In practicing the Lord's Supper, the community not only engages in a life-shaping *anamnesis*, but simultaneously proclaims his death 'until he comes' (Matthew 26:29, 1 Corinthians 11:26). It is an act of committal, notes Carole Bailey Stoneking, and therefore 'deadly work.'

Jesus commits himself into God's hands. Likewise, Christian participation in the Lord's Supper is an act of committal. It is deadly work. Receiving the cup of Christ is deadly work because it forms our lives not in terms of what we will do with them, but what God will do with our lives, in our living and our dying. Receiving the cup of Christ is deadly work because it forms us into a people ready to die for what we believe.²¹²

²¹⁰ *The Didache* VII.4, in *Oldest Church Manual*, 187.

²¹¹ M. Therese Lysaught, "Becoming One Body: Health Care and Cloning," in *Blackwell Companion*, 275. See also "Memory, Funerals, and the Communion of Saints: Growing Old and Practices of Remembering," in *Growing Old in Christ*, 267-301.

²¹² Carole Bailey Stoneking, "Receiving Communion: Euthanasia, Suicide, and Letting Die," in *Blackwell Companion*, 379-380.

The Eucharist is intimately related to the goals of fasting put forward by Athanasius and Antony. The battles fought in the desert were to align one's will with the will of God so that the body might serve as an instrument of God's activity on earth. The discipline of fasting as practiced by Antony was concerned with making the body subject to his Word-guided will. Fasting and the Eucharist enable the Christian to bring the body into submission of one's will in the act of committing one's life to the One who fully entrusted his life to God. Fasting reminds the Christian that her body is not the instrument of her unexamined desires, but the instrument of righteousness (Romans 6:13).

In tearing and crumbling the loaf and reciting 'this is my body, broken for you,' 'this is my blood, poured out for many,' the Christian is reminded of Christ's body, offered up freely to God, yielding to death so that he might defeat death. The Lord's Supper exposes how duplicitous we are, when, in digesting Christ's broken body and drinking in his spilled blood, we entertain notions of putting off death by genetically slowing down our bodies to secure a longer healthier life, while claiming to follow the One who surrendered his life—body and soul—to God, the very One who bids us to come and die.²¹³ The Lord's Supper reminds the Christian that he is not his own. As Stanley Hauerwas has rightly noted, "Christians are not fundamentally concerned about living. Rather, their concern is to die for the right thing."²¹⁴ Thus, insofar as "the fear of aging, suffering, and dying so characteristic of our therapeutic culture is indicative of our refusal to die in Christ,"²¹⁵ the Lord's Supper and fasting, enable the Christian to foster what Alan Lewis has termed an 'Easter Saturday identity,' a life lived in conformity with the self-sacrifice of Christ, free from *Sorge*. For,

theirs is a willingness—which may have little or nothing to do with martyrdom or the physical laying down of life for others, though that can never be excluded—to lead risky, unprotected, costly lives, open to others and committed to self-expenditure on their behalf. This they attempt in conscious but unambitious imitation—though never emulation, continuation, or displacement—of the life, and supremely the death, of Jesus.²¹⁶

²¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 89.

²¹⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, 92.

²¹⁵ Meador and Henson, "Growing Old," in *Growing Old in Christ*, 110.

²¹⁶ Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 454.

The Eucharist reminds the Christian that she only finds life in taking up the cross to follow Jesus, a life that, paradoxically, can only be received by losing it for the sake of the One who freely gave his life for the sake of the world (Matthew 10:38-39). Jesus' death and resurrection serve as a reminder that while death is indeed an enemy, it is a defeated enemy (1 Corinthians 15:54). Thus, while it is right to celebrate small victories against death in prolonging life through the successful treatment of disease as demonstrations of the in-breaking of God's kingdom, Jesus' sacrifice—besouled body and embodied soul—reminds the believer of the appropriateness of bodily decay, and that life is to be offered up in service to God. Finally, the Eucharist reminds the Christian that any fasting from food must involve regular participation in Lord's Supper which proleptically points to the great banquet where people from all nations will gather together at the Lord's table (Luke 13:29).

The community of believers who gather around the Lord's table also provides a context for evaluating the potential impact particular genetic 'therapies' like life extension might have on a community of faith. Just as Paul chastised those who undermined community by abusing the communal meal so intricately linked Lord's Supper by feasting in the presence of the hungry (1 Corinthians 11:20-22), the church may be facing a new inequality between those who have genetically remade their bodies for longevity and those who do not. One must ask however, how relationships between the various members of Christ's body might be adversely affected; particularly, whether a brother or sister would be as willing to serve or help another member who has genetically slowed the aging process in order to secure a longer and healthier life, and vice versa. One can't help but wonder whether Paul might have responded with the sharp rhetorical tort he reserved for those Corinthians abusing the Lord's Supper, "Shall I praise you for this?" (11:22)

In this chapter I have evaluated current attempts to extend the human lifespan via caloric restriction mimetics with respect to Karl Barth's conception of sloth understood as dissipation, or separation of the body and soul, and care, understood as anxiety over one's limited lifespan. I have shown how life extension via genetic manipulation of the human aging process stems from a fear of death and is closely related to anxiety over the brevity of life, and how life extension fails to adequately address the role of the body in the formation of one's soul. As such, I concluded that

life extension is the epitome of *Trägheit* understood as a distancing of the body and soul, a separation lying at the very root of the modern biomedical project as initiated by Descartes. I have also considered the role of asceticism in addressing this ‘distance’ between the body and the soul, arguing that fasting provides a means whereby the Christian may reorder the body and soul so that she might better serve God, even as this enables her to remake her body for a greater longevity. Moreover, I have shown that historically the practice of fasting is not a discipline for the spiritual elite, nor does it demand a hermit-like existence. On the contrary, the early church recognized the benefits of corporate fasting and feasting, where individual fasting was regulated somewhat by the practice of the Lord’s Supper and communal meals. Finally, baptism may serve as an aid to fasting and spiritual development, where the Christian is reminded that she has indeed been crucified with Christ into a new life in which she is both called and enabled to fulfill God’s will for her life, for as long as God holds her body and soul together.

Conclusion

In contrast to many of the philosophical, ethical, and theological approaches to the life extension via aging retarding offered thus far, I have situated the quest for longevity within the Christian struggle to holiness that recognizes both the significance of embodiment as part of God's good creation and the benefit of the body in transforming one's soul. I have shown how contemporary attempts at extending life by retarding aging are motivated by a fear of death which stems from the birth of the modern biomedical project as envisioned by Francis Bacon and Descartes. This desire to put off death by retarding aging found an ally in the theological upheavals of the Great Awakenings in America where the belief in the intractable nature of aging was eroded by theological convictions stressing the instrumental character of aging, depending increasingly on one's hygienic and moral behavior. As science gradually exposed the inefficacy of hygienic approaches to longevity and belief in the afterlife gradually diminished, aging itself became a significant threat to a long, healthy life, engendering an increasing fear of bodily decay, disability, and dependence. This view reflects a profound change in attitudes towards aging and longevity as understood by early Christian thinkers—most especially Augustine—where the promise of a resurrection body rendered any concern or desire for a long or extended life superfluous. Though the Church Fathers regarded earthly life as short, difficult, and entailing a constant battle with sin, Athanasius believed that earthly life could be extended by remaking one's body for longevity through an ascetic regime in re-establishing and maintaining the body as the servant of one's Word-guided soul, the very condition enjoyed by prelapsarian Adam.

Furthermore, it was shown that the ascetic must come under the tutelage of the body as a crucial element in the refinement of one's soul, even as the body was effectively 'remade' by fasting, enabling one to actually put the body into an idling state. I argued that the ascetic regime as inscribed within the Christian narrative informed by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, represents one way to extend life, even though this was not the immediate goal of such a regime. The previous chapter explored the negative side of the disorder or dissipation of the body and soul by examining Karl Barth's christological anthropology. Barth understands the

disorder of body and soul of which Athanasius and Antony spoke as the sin of sloth, *Trägheit*, a judgment determined by the man Jesus who is always an embodied soul rightly ruling his ensouled body. In sloth the body and soul ‘go their separate ways,’ oscillating between relieving the soul of its office as the ruler of the body and releasing the body from the service of the soul. Ultimately, one comes to find one’s limited existence on this earth unbearable, becoming fearful and anxious (*Sorge*) of one’s finite span and ever-approaching death. This dissatisfaction with finitude suggests a disorder of body and soul, again as determined most definitively by Jesus’ being and action as embodied soul and ensouled body, who willingly faced death for the sake of fallen humanity. It was shown how the fear of finitude and bodily decay motivated Descartes to pursue a metaphysical and methodological separation of body and soul, giving birth to assumptions prevalent in science today, engendering the desire to genetically remake the body to fit one’s desires, particularly the desire for greater longevity in relative health and autonomy.

Insofar as the current scientific project is a reflection of the anxiety over a limited lifespan, both driven by and leading to a separation of the body from the soul, I argued that the use of genetic engineering runs the risk of ‘short-circuiting’ the body’s role in refining one’s embodied soul, failing to recognize that no amount of bodily remaking will effectively deal with the anxiety of one’s embodied soul. While such a stance does not entirely prohibit the use of a life-extending pharmaceutical, it raises substantial questions with regards to one’s view of the body as well as one’s trust in one’s good future as secured by God. Moreover, insofar as Barth has characterized *Trägheit* as a separation of body and soul which stems from a lack of discipline, I have argued that ascetic practices such as fasting may be beneficial in effectively reordering the body and soul in restoring the soul as the rightful leader of one’s body, and that such practices counteract the fear of death.

While Barth offers a relentless and rigorous christological anthropology in which the soul is to be the rightful leader of the body, Athanasius and the desert ascetics have offered an account whereby this order might be regained and established through the practice of fasting, a practice situated within the narrative of creation, fall, and

redemption. Thus, while Christian ethicists and theologians recently have been eager to stress that both testaments of Scripture speak of a unity of the body and the soul,¹ there has been comparatively little written about the practices by which the Christian, existentially or phenomenologically speaking, might keep them together. Athanasius and Antony recognized that the sanctification of the Christian involved a transformation of both body and soul, and how critical fasting and the ‘discipline of Scripture’ were to this transformation.² Moreover, they offer an alternative to greater longevity that recognizes the unity of body and soul. In this unity the body is appropriately loved and respected as God’s good creation, serving as a means by which one’s soul might also be instructed, where the body in turn reaps the benefits of a soul which is in intimate fellowship with God. In this reordering the Christian is better equipped to use his body as a ‘media of incarnate expression,’ in recognition that the body, as the temple of the Holy Spirit, is meant for the Lord, and the Lord for the body (1 Corinthians 6:19, 13 respectively). Through the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and Scripture, the disciple of Christ becomes, paradoxically, one who may have one’s life extended, even as the significance attached to the length of life is mitigated by the death and resurrection of Christ.

Opportunities for Further Research

Finally, while I approached the problem of life extension as it fits within a Christian struggle to holiness focused primarily on the extension of life, there is ample room to approach life extension from the side of death. Given that aging retardation can be

¹ Paul Ramsey, echoes Barth in asserting that a person “is an embodied soul or an ensouled body,” *The Patient as a Person* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), xiii. See also *Fabricated Man*, 133, “man is as much the body of his soul as he is the soul of his body.” Ramsey also argues for the unity of body and soul in “The Indignity of ‘Death With Dignity,’” *Hastings Center Studies* 2, (1974): 47-62. Others too emphasize the importance of the unity of body and soul. See Ray S. Anderson, “On Being Human,” 193; Banner, *Christian Ethics*, 47-85; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, First Touchstone Edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 155; Joel B. Green, “‘Bodies—That is, Human Lives’: A Re-Examination of Human Nature in the Bible,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, 152-153; Gilbert C. Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer For Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 4; *Body, Soul, and Bioethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), chs. 1-3; O’Donovan, “Keeping Body and Soul Together,” 223-238; Allen Verhey, *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 68-98.

² This term is borrowed from the title of Chapter Four of Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2000), 63.

rightly construed as putting off death, it is equally possible to investigate the interplay between life extension and various theologies of death and life extension. One particular area for research might involve the interaction between process theologies of death and the kind of replicative immortality found in germ cells. Alternatively, it might prove fruitful to consider Barth's christological conception of Jesus as Lord of time, and the implications for life extension construed as an attempt to become our own 'lords of time.' There is also room to treat life extension from the theological vantage point of justice.³ Finally, given the strong likelihood that this technology will only be available in the most developed nations where life expectancies are already the highest on the planet, second and third world perspectives on aging and old age and would prove equally rich, given especially that life expectancies are falling in many poorer nations currently experiencing epidemics and extreme famine.⁴ The limited theological attention aging research has attracted thus far leaves much room for further exploration.

³ See for instance Audrey R. Chapman, "Ethical Implications of Prolonged Lives," *Theology Today* 60 (2004): 479-496, reprinted in a slightly different form as "The Social and Justice Implications of Extending the Human Life Span," in *Fountain of Youth*, 340-361.

⁴ In Malawi, for instance, AIDS and extreme famine, and high infant mortality have reduced the life expectancy to 37 years of age.

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